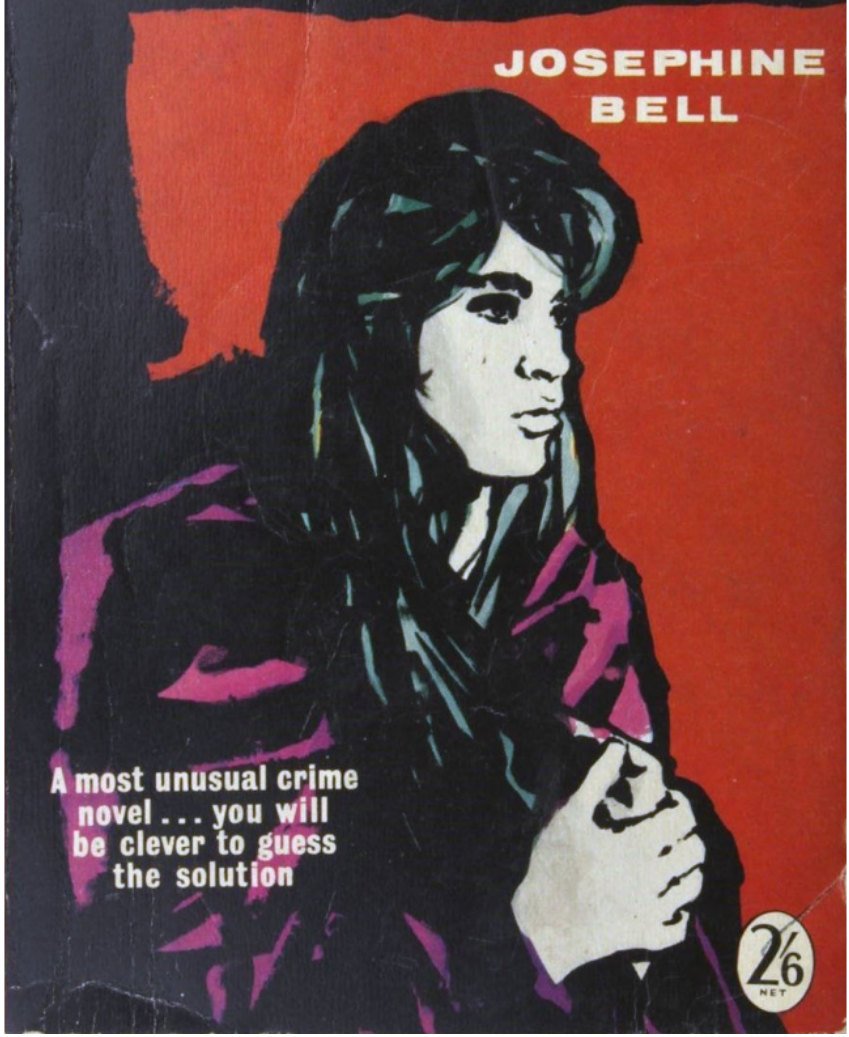
HODDER

DOUBLE DOOM

JOSEPHINE BELL



A most unusual crime novel . . . you will be clever to guess the solution

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Double Doom

Josephine Bell

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DOUBLE DOOM

In a quiet English village, the Strongitharm twins met their fates almost simultaneously. One of the brothers was gassed in the garden hothouse; the other died in a hospital room. Their double doom was no mere accident; indeed, the lethal epidemic threatened to spread. The cause? A family fortune.

A number of suspects were readily noticeable, among them a mentally deficient heiress, a middle-aged *femme fatale,* and a blind, egotistical dowager. The scene, already abounding with unlovely personalities, was to be further darkened by the dowager's son, a man with sinister charm and curious hair.

Josephine Bell scores another success following *Fall Over Cliff, Death in Retirement* and *Bones in the Barrow.*

Chapter One

^ »

Have you got the time, darling? I've left my watch in the bathroom."

There was no answer. Bill Goddard looked across the breakfast table at his wife, and repeated the question.

"Fiona, darling, have you got the time? I have a feeling I shall be late this morning."

"This is *most* extraordinary!" she exclaimed.

"I fail to see anything—"

"Look, Bill!"

She handed him the *Times,* folded in four.

"What at? You haven't even opened it."

"At the Deaths column. That wonderful old name caught my eye. Strongitharm. Do you see? And there are *two* of them, same age, same address, and it says 'suddenly.' Don't you think that's extraordinary, both on the same day, *suddenly*? It doesn't say due to an accident, or anything like that. And the address, Farthing-on-Hone. Quite near here. And the same age-brothers, I suppose—well, twins, wouldn't they be? Anyway, born in the same year."

Bill looked down the column and found the notices. They were identical, except that in one case the Christian names were Hilary St John, and in the other Hugh Evenett. He handed the paper back to Fiona.

"They are, or were, twins," he said, quietly.

"Yes, twins. You mean, you *know*? Isn't it odd?"

"It's more than odd. It's ridiculous."

"What do you mean?"

"Only that Hilary Strongitharm is a patient of mine at Hanningford General. Came in the day before yesterday as an emergency, and is doing very well."

"He isn't dead at all?"

"He certainly wasn't dead when that notice went up to the *Times,* probably the day before yesterday."

"The day he was taken ill?"

"Yes. Yes, I suppose so."

"Was he very ill? I mean, could he have been reported dead to the

relations?"

"No. Of course not. His own doctor took a very poor view of him when he sent him along. He may have said so. No one could possibly have told his people he actually was dead. He began to improve at once, after we got him on a drip."

"What about the brother?"

Bill was looking thoughtful and very grave.

"That one is dead, then?" asked Fiona.

"Yes. Hugh came in to hospital, also on Monday, but some time in the evening. He was dead on arrival."

"What had happened to him?"

"Some accident, I believe. They sent the body straight on to the mortuary at Tukesbridge. I wouldn't know detail. Not in my province."

"How do you know so much? From your patient, the other Strongitharm, I suppose?"

"God forbid! I haven't let them tell him anything yet, and I don't intend to, until he is a darned sight fitter than he is at present. No. I heard it from the family lawyer, on behalf of the old stepmother. Wanted to know yesterday about when he could talk business with my chap."

"Very quick off the mark, isn't he?"

"Who? The solicitor? Well, perhaps. But the family must be about his most important clients, I imagine. Anyway, we don't know that there might not be some urgency."

Fiona poured out a second cup of coffee for her husband, and renewed her own.

"Why haven't we come across this name before?" she asked, looking once more at the announcement column. "Marsden House, Farthing-on-Hone. Where is Marsden House, exactly?"

"A couple of miles from here, across the Hone river," answered Bill. "Between Farthing and Hanningford. Why should we have come across the name? We've been here precisely three months."

"They can't be as important as they sound," Fiona persisted, "or I'd have been certain to hear of them at the Women's Institute, or the W.V.S."

"You will, now," Bill told her. "You'll hear of nothing else for weeks. Even if Hilary survives, as I have no doubt he will."

"Someone seems to have been sure he wouldn't," said Fiona.

They stared at one another, the same thought in both their minds. Then Bill pushed his chair away and stood up.

"Nonsense," he said, firmly. "Probably some simple mistake."

"Such as?"

"Such as—well, one person sent in the right obituary notice, and someone else sent it in with the wrong Christian names. Both intending it for the stiff—sorry, the deceased."

"I suppose it could have happened like that."

"How else? Unless they're balmy."

"You'd better hurry, darling. Time's getting on."

"I asked you the time, ages ago. And you distracted me with all this nonsense about the prize-fighters, or whatever their name is."

"I don't think it is nonsense. I think it's rather sinister. I hope your Hilary Strongitharm will get better."

"Of course he will. *I'm* looking after him."

Nevertheless, on arriving at the Hanningford General Hospital, Bill Goddard, while changing into a white coat, questioned his attendant houseman closely.

"You've seen him already this morning, Snow?"

"Yes, sir. He's had a good night, and seems much stronger. No further bleeding."

"Good. But we're not out of the woods, yet. I want him kept very quiet. Incidentally, have you seen the papers this morning?"

"The papers?"

"Yes. Telegraph or *Times*?"

"No, sir."

Snow had glanced at the pictures in the *Daily Mirror*, the only available paper left when he reached the residents' dining room that morning. He did not feel that this was what his boss meant.

"Well, I don't want either of those to reach Strongitharm. He'd get a double shock and it wouldn't be good for him."

He explained what he meant, and sent Snow off to ring up Sister in the private ward and give her the same instructions. Then he went on his way to the Out-Patient department where his clinic was due to start at ten o'clock.

Snow joined him there a few minutes later.

"Mr Strongitharm has not had any newspapers, sir, and Sister will keep them back. He asked for the barber yesterday, and she put him off over that, too. But she considers he is fit to be shaved this morning. No visitors until after you've seen him, sir."

"I should think not, at this hour of the day."

"I gather his step-sister is up there, waiting."

"She can wait, then."

"His solicitor was here yesterday, making a bit of a nuisance of himself, I gather. But no one gets past Sister Wright, sir, do they?"

"No. They certainly don't. I had a ring from this Mr Pusey, myself. What did the fellow want with Sister, anyway?"

"I suppose—something in connection with Mr Strongitharm's brother, wouldn't it be, sir? How soon he could discuss business with him?"

"Of course. Yes. But I can't see why it should be urgent."

"No, sir."

Young Snow could think of several reasons for the lawyer's anxiety, but the matter held little importance for him. The business of the moment was to get his chief to start work. He was twenty minutes late already, and the rows of chairs in the Out-Patient hall were filling rapidly. So he said nothing, but moved away to his own table in the clinic, where he would interview the old patients while Mr Goddard saw the new ones.

"All right, Sister," Bill Goddard said, seating himself, and drawing forward the top sheet of new notes. "First patient, please."

The work of the clinic went forward smoothly, and on this occasion, fairly quickly. Goddard enjoyed the work. His recent appointment as surgeon to the Hanningford Group of Hospitals gave him the scope he had been looking for during the past three years of grind as an assistant surgeon. This group needed his special knowledge of the kidney and urinary tract. Already he had weeded out much general surgery from his clinic, particularly of the minor sort. The general practitioners of the neighbourhood were beginning to send him the right stuff early, instead of messing about with it ineffectually in the patients' own homes. Hence this case of Strongitharm; an acute haemorrhage from the bladder, the cause of which had not yet been finally determined.

As he questioned, and examined, and signed chits for further examinations, his thoughts kept going back to the grey-haired corpulent man in the private ward, who had shown no fear, but merely anger, at his predicament. It had been the anger of a naturally very reticent, highly conventional person, horrified to find himself at the centre of a dramatic situation. As the surgical registrar had said, when Bill arrived in answer to an emergency call, "If the poor old beggar hadn't bled his blood pressure down to zero he'd have had a stroke on admission." That remark had led him, Bill, to the probable core of the matter. Dr Matthews, the Strongitharms' G.P., was coming up to see him after the clinic that morning. He guessed what he would hear.

He was right. The last patient dismissed, and the papers handed over to the clerical staff, Goddard made his way to the medical staff room for mid-morning coffee. Dr Matthews was already there, talking to one of the two senior physicians. The latter introduced him to Bill.

"I suppose you had him on anti-coagulants?" Bill asked, when they had

settled down to discuss the case of Strongitharm.

Dr Matthews nodded ruefully.

"One must follow the fashion," he said. "Particularly with the small remains of private practice. They all know far too much these days. Or rather, not enough. They hear of the latest treatments without in any way understanding them. They demand to have what the other fellow is given, whether it really helps them or not"

"Do you let your patients bully you?" Bill asked, rather surprised at this attitude.

"By no means. It was quite reasonable to put Hilary Strongitharm on the stuff. He had a very mild coronary a year ago. What I've just been saying applies really to his brother Hugh. The one who was gassed in the garden hothouse."

"That was what happened to him, was it?"

"Yes. Old-fashioned coke stove and water pipes. Blocked chimney, I believe. They were very keen gardeners, the pair of them."

"The brother insisted on having anti-coagulants, too, did he?"

"Yes. Twins. You know how they are. Or can be. These two have always lived together except in the War; well, for the first two years of it. They got together again pretty soon; they weren't young, and practically unemployable."

"So Hilary had a high blood pressure, and a tendency to clot, but Hugh didn't?"

"Hugh's blood pressure was normal for his age; he never had any symptoms at all of arterial disease."

Bill got up to refill his visitor's coffee cup. When he came back he said, "My Mr Strongitharm, Hilary, was furious with me for not allowing him to continue his anti-coagulant pills. He handed his box to Sister on arrival, weak as he was. Whispered to her he'd have a heart attack if he didn't take the stated dose."

"Poor old boy. Pathetic."

"Damned obstinate. We found another box of them in the drawer of his locker next morning. At least'" Bill paused, reflectively, "I imagine they were the same."

Dr Matthews was startled.

"What d'you mean?"

"Not quite the same shape and size. I'm a surgeon, not a physician. I give my drugs in hypodermics, mostly. I sent this stuff down to the pharmacy. They may have something to tell us. I'll ask Parsons to come along, now."

While they waited for the pharmacist, Dr Matthews told Bill all he knew of the Strongitharm brothers. They lived in their late father's home, Marsden

House, in the Hone valley. Their father's widow, who had been his second wife, also lived there, with her only child by her previous marriage, a daughter.

"Curious set-up, isn't it?" Bill asked.

"Not really. The old boy left a considerable fortune. Both it and the house to the twins on the old lady's death. She is very feeble these days, and nearly blind. They thought she was going soon after the War, when they came back home from London. But she recovered, as so many of these tough old birds do, now we can scotch their pneumonias. The twins have been a great comfort to her; she gets on with them extremely well. They help her with her business affairs, as far as she lets them, which isn't by any means all the way. She relies to a very great extent on her solicitor, a chap called Pusey. Practises in Hanningford. But for the general running of the house and grounds, the twins have been quite openly in command, and done it very well and most tactfully. The daughter, poor woman, is no help to her mother, of course."

Bill let this pass. He was not interested in Mrs Strongitharm's problems, but only in Hilary. He turned the conversation back to the former illnesses of his patient, and was still making mental notes of these when the pharmacist came to the staff room.

"Parsons, this is Dr Matthews."

The doctor outlined again his treatment with anti-coagulants, and Parsons nodded.

"Got anything for us?" Bill Goddard asked.

"Yes, sir. Yes, indeed. That first box you handed in was the stuff Dr Matthews says he prescribed. The second box—the one you found in his locker next day—those tablets, sir, are all plain aspirin."

"What!"

Dr Matthews's face of horror turned from one to the other.

"Yes, sir," went on Parsons, gravely. "Not only that, but they've been cut down to the same size as the others; filed down, I should say. And the box was like the other, and had the same instructions on it."

"Including the warning that no patient on anti-coagulants must take aspirin or kindred drugs?" said Dr Matthews, grimly.

"That's right, sir."

"Well!" Bill Goddard drew a long breath. "Perhaps we have there the explanation of his haemorrhage. And if the substitution was deliberate, a very malicious person would appear to have been at work."

"It's inconceivable!" said Dr Matthews.

"It's a fact," said Parsons.

Goddard took a turn across the staff room, which was now empty except for the three men concerned with Hilary Strongitharm.

"I shall go on with the full examination," the surgeon said. "I've put him down for a straight X-ray for stone tomorrow. They can do that in the ward. I think he'll be fit enough by Friday for me to have a look inside his bladder. He has nothing to suggest a growth except the bleeding, but you never know. On the other hand, after what Parsons has told us, I shan't be at all surprised if that turns out to be the whole explanation. I've had this sort of thing happen before. In which case you may consider, Matthews, letting him take his chance of a coronary or a stroke in future."

"I might consider it," said Dr Matthews, "but I'm pretty certain Strongitharm won't. He'll be keener than ever to see the old girl off, and call Marsden House his own. His very own, poor chap, though he doesn't know it yet—I hope."

"Oh, no," Bill assured him. "We've been careful not to say a thing about his brother's death."

He caught Parsons's eye and nodded. The pharmacist turned to go.

"Thanks very much, Parsons. Will you write up your findings as a report to me, and let me have it soon?"

"Yes, sir."

"And I hope you've kept the boxes, and the remaining tablets?"

"Of both kinds, sir. Yes."

"Good."

Parsons went away, closing the door behind him. Goddard and Dr Matthews turned to one another. But before either of them had time to speak there was a hurried knock and the door opened again.

"Oh, sir, I hoped you'd still be here."

It was the house surgeon, Snow, breathless, and for a confident young man, used to unpleasant sights, abnormally pale.

"What is it, Snow?"

"Mr Strongitharm, sir. I was seeing a late case in Out-Patients when my colours went up."

"Get on. What's happened?"

"I only meant—I was too late, sir."

"Too late for what?"

"To do anything for him. He's—he's dead, sir."

"*Dead*!" The exclamation, coming sharply from both Goddard and Matthews, made Snow retreat a step. With the door propping him up, he said hoarsely, "I'm afraid so, sir. It looks like—it looks like a heart attack."

"What price taking him off the anti-coagulants, now?" Dr Matthews murmured.

Chapter Two

In a hospital, sudden death is not a sensation, however unexpected it may be. Death is taken for granted, as a necessary, inevitable, and not always undesirable part of life; not as a shocking calamity, for which someone must be to blame. Nevertheless, Bill Goddard walked rapidly towards the private wards block of the Hanningford General with a sense of irritation, even of injury, and a strong inclination to find fault with those who had let Hilary Strongitharm slip away. The man ought not to have died. He, Goddard, had by no means finished with his case, which had been a distinctly interesting one. Following, as it did, his confident account of the illness to Dr Matthews, Bill felt deeply aggrieved. Something queer must have happened; some carelessness, some lack of observation. He was not unwilling to agree with the general practitioner that the stopping of anti-coagulant treatment might have produced the long-feared clot. But if he had not stopped it the old boy would probably have bled to death by now. He reviewed all his treatment and could not discover anything to criticise. But his sense of outrage remained.

On arriving in the private block, he found the Sister in charge in much the same state of mind as his own. She greeted the three men calmly, but she was clearly on the defensive.

"There wasn't a sound out of him," she said. "Not a sound, and he didn't ring his bell."

"You mean you just found him dead?" asked Bill. "What time was that?"

"About ten minutes ago, sir. I was in my room, looking over the notes of your new kidney case, Mr Southam, because I expected you up any minute. And then Nurse Carr came running along the corridor, calling for me. I went out at once to stop her making such a noise, but it was obvious there was something wrong. She said Mr Strongitharm was very ill, so I told her to put you on call, and get Mr Snow's colours up, and I went to his room. He was dead. By the look of it he had been dead some little time."

"I see. Well, we'd better have a look at him."

They moved away from the entrance door, where Sister had met them, and were proceeding along the corridor when a nurse came out of the room opposite Sister's office.

"Please, Sister—" she began, but seeing Goddard, Snow, and Dr Matthews, stopped short, reddening.

"Speak to Sister if you want to," said Bill, continuing on his way towards

Hilary Strongitharm's room.

"What is it, Nurse?"

Sister was impatient. Nurse Carr ought to have calmed down by now, but evidently she had not.

"I can't do anything with her," the nurse said, jerking her head towards the door through which she had come. "I don't understand half of what she's saying, and she frightens me, the way she looks at you."

"Nonsense," said Sister Wright, briskly. "Have you given her a hot drink?"

"She won't take it."

"Well, just keep her quiet till the doctors have finished. Tell her Mr Goddard will speak to her presently."

"Yes, Sister."

"Anything to do with this?" Bill asked, as Sister rejoined him at the door of the private room.

"Yes, sir. Mr Strongitharm's step-sister, Miss Morley. She's very upset. She was with Nurse when it was discovered."

"What is she doing here at all? I thought I said no visitors whatever, until after I'd seen him this morning."

"He had no visitors," said Sister, firmly. "She was waiting till you came."

"But you have just said that Nurse—"

"It was against my orders," said Sister. "But it was not Nurse Carr's fault, either. Apparently Miss Morley left the waiting room on her own, because Nurse says she saw her come out when she was coming down the corridor herself from the other end. They got to Mr Strongitharm's door at the same time. Miss Morley said she couldn't wait any longer, and so could she see him for just one minute, and Nurse said she must wait till you had been up; Nurse went in, shutting the door behind her, and found Mr Strongitharm dead, as I told you. She came running to me, forgetting Miss Morley, who must have been still outside the door. I found her inside the room, beginning to go into hysterics."

Goddard turned to Dr Matthews.

"You know this Miss Morley?"

"Oh, yes. But I'm not her doctor. She has no local man, as far as I know. She sees someone in London from time to time. Has done for years."

Dr Matthews looked across at Sister Wright.

"Are we to understand you have got Miss Morley here still?"

"Yes, sir. Nurse Carr is with her."

"I think we ought to speak to her later. Will you tell her so?"

"Yes, sir."

Sister went away, and the three men drew near to the bed.

Hilary Strongitharm had been a sturdy, short-legged man, more inclined to corpulence in his middle age than his twin brother, Hugh. In fact, as they aged, the two men had grown more dissimilar, and from being indistinguishable in childhood, one who saw them for the first time in the week of their deaths would have found no more than a vague family resemblance. These thoughts occurred to Dr Matthews as he gazed down on the twisted features of his former patient. Bill Goddard, who had never seen the twin brother at all, was solely concerned with the disaster to his interesting case.

The dead man lay in a contorted attitude, flat on his back with his legs twisted to one side. His left arm dangled over the edge of the bed, the right hand still clutched the bedclothes. The mouth was wide open, as were the muddy, staring eyes. The face was congested and blue. The chin was smooth, evidently quite recently shaved.

Goddard felt the body. It was still warm.

"Could be heart, I suppose?" he said. "The postmortem will show. I don't pretend to know anything in that line. What do you think, Matthews?"

"I agree with you that the postmortem will tell us what we want to know about the actual cause of death. But there are two things I should like to clear up now."

"Such as?"

"His position—his attitude. Looks as if he had been struggling for breath—twisting from side to side, probably raising himself in bed, trying to reach his bell. You would have thought he could have let out some sort of cry for help, if he was capable of all that movement. Then again, he was flinging himself about, yet his pillow is flat and smooth. Also he has had froth on his lips; you can see where the saliva has run down the side of his neck. But there are no marks of it on the pillow. I should say there has been some tidying up done on this body, and I should like to know why and by whom."

Goddard looked with fresh interest and respect at the elderly practitioner. The good G.P. had always been a first-class observer. After all, he set the ball rolling in every case, trivial or serious. He was the prime sorter-out. He had to have a keen eye. Here it was, in action.

"Get hold of that nurse, Snow," he said to his houseman. "The one who found him dead. And tell Sister not to let this Miss Morley go. Not on any account."

When Snow had left the room he turned again to Dr Matthews.

"You said there were two things you wanted to know. What was the other?"

"This."

Dr Matthews picked up a newspaper that lay on the locker beside the bed. It was the *Daily Telegraph*, and it was folded to show the announcements of

Births, Marriages, and Deaths.

"Someone brought him the newspaper—with the double notices of his brother's death and his own. Quite enough to produce a fatal heart attack in a man of his temperament, in the physical condition he was in."

"Newspapers were banned," the surgeon said, quickly.

He explained how his wife had shown him the two notices that morning, and described his subsequent action.

"They seem to have slipped up on that, too," said Dr Matthews, grimly.

Snow came back, followed by Nurse Carr. Goddard wanted to know exactly what action she had taken when she found that Strongitharm was dead.

"I didn't know he was actually dead, sir," the nurse explained. "I saw directly I looked at him that something was wrong, so I went for Sister at once."

"Without seeing first if there was anything you could do for him?"

Nurse Carr blushed.

"I—he wasn't moving—I did really think he was dead."

"Then why not say so?"

Tears welled into Nurse Carr's blue eyes. Bill made an impatient gesture towards the corpse.

"You'll have to think a bit more clearly, Nurse. And be prepared to take responsibility for what you do think. Now did you, or did you not, touch him at all?"

"No, sir."

"You did not straighten his pillow or his body?"

"Oh, no, sir."

"I see. Well, come over here, now. I am going to lift him up and I want you to take the pillow away from under his head. Take it up by the two ends, and keep it in your hands. Don't let it touch anything. Got that clear?"

"Yes, sir."

"Right."

Nurse Carr followed his instructions neatly. When Goddard had lowered the corpse again to the bed he took the pillow from her, turned it over and carried it to the window. Dr Matthews followed.

"Here's the saliva," Bill said, quietly. "On the other side. Just as you expected, didn't you?"

"Yes," said Dr Matthews. He bent forward suddenly to sniff at the pillow.

"Talcum powder," he said.

"Talcum powder?"

"You let him have the barber this morning, didn't you?"

"Good Lord, yes! I'd forgotten. That clinches it. He turned from side to side during the fatal attack, whatever it was, and rubbed off the barber's talc as well as dribbling on the pillow."

"Theoretically, yes," said Dr Matthews. "Only the dribble appears to be concentrated in the middle patch of the pillow, with the talc on either side."

Bill frowned as he worked this one out.

"The saliva would run back, wouldn't it? Tend to concentrate at the back of the head as it ran off the face and down the neck?"

"I suppose so."

"What other explanation is there?"

Dr Matthews was evasive.

"I think we must find who turned the pillow upside down," he said. "I think that is vitally important."

"I agree with you." Goddard turned to the house surgeon. "Snow, try to find the barber chap and get him to come up here if he is still in the hospital. If not, this afternoon. Don't tell him what's happened, but say it is urgent, and has to do with a man he shaved this morning."

"Yes, sir."

Dr Matthews touched the pillow, still held between Bill's hands.

"I think this should be kept very carefully," he said. "I think you should call the coroner's officer now, and show him this most important piece of evidence."

Goddard, looking beyond Dr Matthews's bent head, saw Nurse Carr's face stiffen and grow pale.

"That's all, Nurse," he said. "You may go. Tell Sister we are coming out to talk to Miss Morley."

When she had gone Dr Matthews said, quietly, "The same Miss Morley who was found standing in this room when Sister arrived, called by that rather emotional girl who has just left us."

"Exactly. Perhaps Miss Morley can tell us something."

"I doubt it," said Dr Matthews, sadly, shaking his head.

Nevertheless, he followed Bill Goddard out of the dead man's room, and down the corridor. The door opposite Sister's office (which was also her sitting room while on duty), was closed, but they both heard voices behind it. Bill opened the door and they went in.

The room was identical with the patients' rooms, being, in fact, one of them at present not in use. The bed had been moved against one wall, and chairs placed in an irregular row to turn it into a waiting room for the patients' friends and relations. In two of these chairs, side by side, sat Miss Morley and

Sister Wright, conducting a conversation that consisted of random expostulation on one side, and equally random comfort on the other.

Goddard looked with some curiosity at the late Hilary Strongitharm's step-sister. From her name he gathered that she must be Mrs Strongitharm's daughter by a previous marriage, and therefore no blood relation of the twins. So it was not surprising that she bore no physical resemblance whatever to the dead man.

She was a clumsily built woman; in her late thirties, he decided. Just now her heavy features, unrelieved by any sort of make-up, were rendered even less attractive by swollen eyelids, reddened eyes, and a puffy nose. Miss Morley had been indulging in a most uninhibited crying fit. A lamentable piece of work, altogether, Bill thought. The tweed suit, quite out of place on this sunny spring day, was the drab brown so often worn by women with grey or mouse-coloured hair. It was the last thing she should have put on. Tweed for the country, yes, but not that colour, and not that heavy rough type of material, and not, certainly not, worn with the jacket buttoned up and the skirt riding above her fat ungainly knees. A distressing sight, Bill thought again. But he remembered the shock she had just received, and spoke to her kindly.

"I was looking after your step-brother, Miss Morley. I need hardly say how sorry I am his illness has ended this way. It was quite unexpected."

She stared at him. It was a vacant look, accompanied by a little writhing movement of the wide mouth. But Bill felt sure she had both heard and understood what he had said.

Sister Wright, who had risen to her feet when the two men entered the room, pressed a hand gently on Miss Morley's shoulder.

"I'm afraid Miss Morley did not quite understand my instructions," she said. "She went into Mr Strongitharm's room without permission. The shock would have been less severe if—"

Miss Morley shook off the friendly hand.

"Nurse was taking me to see him," she said, looking up at Bill. "She said, 'Wait outside till I see if he is ready for you,' and I waited. She went in and then she came out screaming. I thought she was mad, so I went in. She'd left the door open after her."

All this was said in a slow, complaining voice, a defensive voice, giving the impression that Miss Morley was in the habit of warding off many kinds of attack. But what she had said made perfect sense, and Bill Goddard nodded.

"That was a very natural thing to do," he said, quietly.

Miss Morley's face relaxed into a faint smile, and she gave an audible sigh of relief.

"It wasn't such a great shock as you might think," she said. "Mother told me a long time ago I mustn't ever say or do anything to make him angry, or

he might have a stroke. So I took good care to keep out of his way."

"I see."

Goddard glanced at Dr Matthews, who had been standing back until now, but immediately came forward.

"Good morning, Miss Morley," he said. "Can you tell us why you wanted to see Mr Strongitharm at all this morning? It isn't the usual visiting time, is it?"

She looked at Dr Matthews with her former vacant stare, and the strange, convulsive movement of her heavy lips. But she did not speak to him, and almost at once turned her eyes away.

"I think I will go home now," she said to the room at large, and pulled at her brown leather gloves.

There was a little pause, and then Goddard, ignoring altogether this remark, said, "Tell me, Miss Morley, when you went into Mr Strongitharm's room, did you notice a newspaper on the table by the bed?"

"Newspaper?"

"Yes. *The Telegraph*, to be exact."

She shook her head.

"You did not, by any chance, show him the *Telegraph*?"

Miss Morley fumbled in her lap. Under a large brown leather handbag Bill saw the folds of a newspaper.

"That's all right, Miss Morley. I see you have a copy of the *Telegraph* with you."

"It's their copy. Nobody wanted it. Mother has the *Times*. She has it read to her. She's blind."

"Have you looked at the obituary column this morning?"

"No. Mother lets me have the paper after lunch. She has it read to her in the morning. She can get about a little, but she can't read. A lady from the W.V.S. comes every morning, before she gets up."

Goddard smiled.

"But you have the *Telegraph* with you, not the *Times.*"

"I told you. It's theirs. Hugh's and Hilary's. It still comes."

"I see. Now, you were only in your step-brother's room for a minute or two. Did you go up to the bed at all? Did you touch him, or try to do anything for him?"

She was staring, with fixed blank eyes, the attitude defensive, the whole face sunk into obstinate refusal.

"Did you, by any chance, turn his pillow over?"

Miss Morley shut her eyes and burst into loud angry sobs. Her face grew scarlet, tears streamed from under the heavy lids, she panted and shook.

Dr Matthews stepped forward and gripped her arm firmly. Immediately Miss Morley gasped, stopped crying, and struggled to free herself.

"Let me go!" she shouted. "You aren't my doctor. I won't have it! Let me go!"

"Yes," said Dr Matthews, perfectly calm. "That is just what I was going to suggest. I think you ought to go, at once. Home. I will call a taxi for you."

He left the room. Miss Morley got up, pulling awkwardly at her unbecoming suit. She was about to speak to Goddard when there was a knock at the door and Snow put his head round it.

"The barber is here, sir."

"Right. Can you send a nurse down to the front entrance with Miss Morley, please, Sister? See she finds her taxi all right."

Miss Morley drew herself up.

"I found my way here without assistance," she said, in a hard aggressive voice. "So I don't see why I can't find my way out again. And I don't want the expense of a taxi. I shall get a bus to Farthing and then walk. As I always do."

She marched to the door, dragged it open with a clumsy gesture, and pushing her way past Snow, who stared at her open-mouthed, stumped down the corridor, through the swing doors, and away.

"Oh, well," said Goddard. Sister's outraged face made him laugh. He patted her arm.

"Poor woman," he said, meaning Miss Morley. "A bit off sharp, shouldn't you think?"

"Most distinctly," agreed Sister. "Will you excuse me, sir?"

He let her go, and beckoned the barber into the waiting room. But he learned nothing of much moment, except the fact that Mr Strongitharm had complained of not being offered a newspaper that morning, and had asked him to mention it in the right quarter. Meeting the newspaper trolley in the lift going down he had done this, only to learn that Mr Strongitharm had been overlooked on purpose, at Sister's request. The barber had not seen Miss Morley at all, while he was in the private ward corridor.

"Who did you see? Staff, I mean, or domestics?"

"One ward maid, in the kitchen as I passed along. Sister, of course, to get my list for the day. Nurse Carr. Oh, and the special nurse."

"Special nurse?"

"He means the male nurse, sir," Snow explained. "Mr Strongitharm made an objection on admission."

"I remember. Said he wouldn't bloody well stay in the so-and-so hospital if he had to have females messing him about."

"That's right, sir. Nurse Barker was detailed for him."

"Tell Nurse Barker I'd like to speak to him after lunch. He can find me in the operating theatre before I start the afternoon list."

Goddard thanked the barber and watched him go away. Then he went out into the corridor to find Sister. He at once upset her again by telling her to lock the door of Mr Strongitharm's door until the coroner's officer arrived.

"You don't imagine—?" she began, indignantly.

"I never imagine," said Bill. "Surgeons are born without that capacity. But I'm not taking chances. And I haven't the remotest idea of the cause of death. On the other hand Dr Matthews is brim full of ideas. He has a very powerful imagination. I shouldn't be surprised if he isn't over at Tukesbridge now, unloading it on the County Constabulary."

Sister looked very shocked, but she said nothing. Bill Goddard hurried away to his other cases. This business had put him far behind in his morning's work.

Sister Wright also had lost much time looking after Miss Morley. She bustled about, picking up the threads of her work, urging on the other nurses, arranging treatment, carrying out special jobs herself. When her lunch hour break arrived, she went into her own room. All the writing work was behind, but the ward itself had caught up. She looked about, moved the papers on her desk, went out into the corridor.

"Nurse Carr," she said. "Do you know where my paper has got to?"

"Paper?"

"My *Telegraph*. It was on my desk."

"I haven't seen it, Sister."

"Have a look round for me."

The paper was discovered, folded neatly, in the waiting room. Nurse Carr brought it in to Sister.

"Did Miss Morley borrow it?" she asked.

"Miss Morley? Of course not. She had one of her own. She brought it with her. I saw it in her hand when she got here. She was reading it in the waiting room when I broke the news to her he was really dead."

Nurse Carr went back to her work of collecting the patients' dinner trays, and Sister left the ward. She was still wondering why her *Telegraph* had moved so mysteriously into the waiting room. The explanation was quite simple, but it did not occur to her, and she soon let her thoughts turn to other things.

The Hone valley bus bumped slowly on its five-mile journey from Hanningford to Farthing-on-Hone. Joyce Morley stared straight in front of

her, clasping her leather handbag with both hands. She had nothing to do but look at the passing fields and hedges and the other passengers. All these sights were familiar to her, so she did not bother to take them in. She stared about her, but she was seeing more desirable things in the private world of her mind. It was a very small world, in which she had moved for nearly forty years. It was peopled sparsely, with shadowy but friendly shapes of her own making. And with one other: a being of power and wealth and beauty, whose image, symbol of supreme love, was now always before her.

Chapter Three

Later that day Miss Morley lay in bed in her own room at Marsden House, propped on pillows, knitting rather slowly a jumper for her very old teddy bear.

She had been sent to bed before lunch. It was the recognised treatment for her fairly regular outbursts of hysteria. Though on this occasion there had been more kindness than irritation in the decision to retire her from the agitation below stairs.

When she reached home from Hanningford she found that the hospital had already telephoned the news of Hilary Strongitharm's sudden and unexpected death. She found her mother prostrate, unwilling to see her, and her mother's personal maid, Mabel, who was also her own private attendant, fully occupied with the old lady. The two dailies, cook and housemaid, who hardly ever spoke to her, had shut themselves into the kitchen to have an intense discussion of the news while they prepared luncheon in a half-hearted manner. Only Mrs Stringer, who came three days a week to do the "rough," would talk to her; but not at all encouragingly.

"You did ought to have listened to advice," she said, severely, pausing with stiff brush in hand, as she knelt on the stairs.

Joyce Morley sat down, a few steps above her.

"I don't see why," she said. "I wanted to take him some flowers, and he was much better, and the nurses said I might speak to him for a few minutes if I waited till the doctor came up."

"Well, I must say that sounds fair enough," said Mrs Stringer. "Provided you were told you could go at all."

Joyce slapped the stairs on which she sat.

"I won't be ordered about," she said. "They've no right to be always ordering me about."

"There, there," said Mrs Stringer, soothingly, but moving quickly two steps further down. "No need to get excited, Miss Morley."

Joyce sighed. No, there wasn't any need. But the events of the morning had been a severe strain, and she was tired, very tired, and her head had begun to throb. She turned her face to one side and pressed her forehead against the banisters. Tears began to roll slowly down her cheeks.

Mrs Stringer moved on down the stairs, brushing as she went. Presently

Joyce stopped crying, blew her nose, and slid slowly down from step to step until she had caught up the worker.

"Why don't you hoover them?" she asked, when the rising dust made her sneeze.

"Because the flex isn't long enough," answered Mrs Stringer, patiently. She had heard this question many times, and always gave the same answer.

"Wilson could make it longer for you."

Wilson was a jobbing gardener and handy man, who worked full time at Marsden House. He was an elderly man now. His son had been killed in the War, and his grandson, twelve years old, helped him on Saturdays and school holidays. Wilson was expert in mending fuses, clearing blocked sinks, curing taps that dripped, and doing other household jobs that the twins disliked, or were incapable of managing.

"Mrs Strongitharm prefers to have the stairs brushed, miss."

"She wouldn't know. She's blind, nearly. She wouldn't see."

"That's no way to talk of your mother, Miss Morley. Poor old lady, I don't know what she'll do with the two gentlemen gone. I don't, indeed."

Joyce pulled herself up by the banisters, so that she stood looking down at Mrs Stringer.

"She's got me, hasn't she?" she said, in a loud voice. "They were going to die, anyway. Hilary was very ill. I heard him tell Mother he might die any time of a heart attack or a stroke. That was what he had those special pills for. Hugh was ill, too. He had fits. That was a fit I saw him in when I looked into the greenhouse. They are saying it was an accident, but it was a fit. I know it was. It was a fit!"

"There, there," said Mrs Stringer again, getting up from her knees this time.

But Joyce was by now very excited, and the soothing words only made her worse. The pent-up hysteria of the morning took charge at last, the tears flowed, the babbling words grew more and more incoherent, and began to be punctuated with cries of rage and fear. Mabel came running from Mrs Strongitharm's room, and Rose and Jean opened the kitchen door to listen, though they did not go out into the hall.

In a little while Miss Morley gave way to the practised grip on her arm, and stopped throwing herself about. She stumbled upstairs again to her room, where she let herself be undressed and put to bed, swallowed the usual sedative, and slept until her lunch was brought to her on a tray. Afterwards she was told to go to sleep again, but she disregarded this order, fetched her knitting from the top drawer of her dressing table, and took it back to bed with her, where she lay, moving her fingers slowly in dull awkward repetition, while her memory ranged jerkily over the events of the last three days.

It had been Monday when the queer things began to happen. In the middle of the morning, when she was alone in her own room, she became aware of a disturbance below in the house. There were running footsteps and agitated voices; she could tell that by their raised anxious notes. She had crept softly out, to lean over the banisters and listen, but by that time whoever had been in the hall or on the first landing had gone into one of the rooms. There was still a confused chatter rising through the house, but that told her nothing.

At lunch time no one spoke much, and the meal was soon over. She noticed that Hilary was out, but when she asked where he was, no one answered.

She went back to her own room after lunch, and forgot about it all, as she lay on her bed counting the clouds that floated past her window. She counted very well up to ten. The teens were a bit shaky, but after twenty she was perfectly sound again, though she could seldom be bothered to go further than thirty-eight, which was her own age. A white cloud for every year of her life, floating past the window as blankly, as emptily, as those years had passed. While she was counting them she had fallen asleep.

At tea time she had got up, combed her lank hair, and gone down to the drawing room. She found only her mother and Mabel there, the latter pouring out tea, the former leaning back in a corner of the sofa, her head resting on a hand, her blind gaze directed towards the light from the window. As Joyce went into the room, the head came round sharply in her direction.

"Hugh?"

"No, Mother. It's me."

Mrs Strongitharm sighed. Age and infirmity had not made her more tolerant, but less so. Being herself now partly disabled, she felt no added pity for her only child's disablement. On the contrary, she resented it more every day.

"Well, come and have your tea. Is Hugh about?"

"I don't know."

"You mean you didn't see him as you came down?"

"No."

Mabel arranged Mrs Strongitharm's cup and plate on the small table beside her. She brought the latter's questing fingers into contact with the cup's handle, then left her to supply Joyce's needs.

"What was all that row about this morning?" Joyce asked, looking up into Mabel's face.

There was a little silence.

"It's no good pretending there wasn't anything," Miss Morley went on, loudly, "because I was out on the landing, listening."

Mrs Strongitharm put down her cup, finding the saucer with her other hand.

"You had better be told," she said, more to herself, apparently, than to her daughter. "You will only hear it from the servants."

Joyce sat forward, knees apart, hands falling between, her skirt riding up over her fat legs. Her mouth was a little open and she breathed noisily.

"Pull your skirt down, Joyce," said Mabel, automatically. Miss Morley took no notice.

"Hilary was taken ill suddenly about half-past eleven, today," Mrs Strongitharm said. "Very gravely ill. He has gone to the Manningford General Hospital. We are very anxious indeed about him."

Joyce rubbed one hand against the other. She showed no surprise or even concern, but then she felt none.

"Will he die?" she asked.

A look of pain crossed Mrs Strongitharm's face.

"Please God, he will live," she said. "They can do wonderful things now-a-days in some cases. Even if they can do nothing for my sight," she added, despondently.

"Dr Matthews was very worried," said Mabel. "He said it was touch and go with him."

"Has Hugh gone to hospital, too?" Joyce asked.

"No. Why should you think he had?"

"They never do anything apart."

"This is rather different. Illness is personal."

Joyce did not understand what her mother meant, but from the tone of voice she knew she was rebuked. She made a rude face in the direction of Mrs Strongitharm and then began to eat her bread and butter quickly, with strong tearing bites.

After tea she had wandered out into the garden. In the old days the lawns, velvet smooth, had stretched in three noble sweeps from the terrace down to the banks of the Hone river which ran past the bottom of the garden. But now only the lawn nearest to the house was kept properly mown. The rest of the grass was cut two or three times in the season with a motor-scythe. One of the villagers, a relation of Wilson, the gardener, kept a couple of goats tethered in this grass. The boy, Trevor, brought them in the morning and led them away at night.

Joyce walked across the lawn to the shrubbery, passed behind it, and came to the beginning of the kitchen garden. Here a collection of brick buildings, the former stables and coach house, mouldered in partial ruin, the roofs

unmended, the grass sprouting freely between the cobble-stones. The twins had bought a new garage for their car after the War. Its white prefabricated concrete looked out of place beside the old weathered brick. Beyond these buildings, on the south side, sheltered, catching the sun, were the glasshouses, and these, unlike the stables, were in perfect condition. They shone with a layer of fresh white paint, their glass roofs glittered in the late afternoon sun.

Joyce looked in through the first of them. This was the hothouse, where her step-brothers grew orchids and exotic ferns. Joyce never went inside if she could help it. She did not like the close steamy atmosphere, and the creeping, clinging, flowering plants frightened her with their strangeness. But she rather liked to look in from outside. It was like looking into an aquarium. One of the neighbours had an aquarium. When Joyce was asked to tea there she spent a long time sitting beside it, watching the gently waving weeds and the darting fish.

She watched Hugh Strongitharm now. He was standing in front of one of his orchids, and he did not see her, because his face was covered by his handkerchief. She saw his shoulders heave as he sneezed; she giggled, feeling quite safe on the other side of the glass, where he could not hear her. She remembered that both Hugh and Hilary had started heavy colds a few days before. Was that what had been the matter with Hilary? Something to do with his cold? Or had it been what she was expecting—?

She wandered away, past the cold frames, set out with marrows and cucumbers, past the seed bed, all neat rows of tiny plants with clean dark earth between. She felt great satisfaction looking at these small growing things. The spring always pleased her, but this mild late May afternoon had been wasted so far, because of Hilary. It need not have been wasted. She could have gone for another walk by herself, if Mabel was too busy with her mother. If only they ever told her what was going on in the house, she could make her plans accordingly. As it was, they kept her out of everything until it was over. That wasn't fair. It was this silly idea that she needed looking after all the time, just because she got headaches. No one tried to do anything for her for long. In the end they all sent her away, to rest, by herself. She was sick of resting.

She walked out through the iron gate in the yew hedge, back on to the lawn and down to the end of the garden, where she stared over the low quick-set hedge at the river, bounding the rough lawns on the far side. The goats were still there, moving slowly within the circle of their tethers. She could not see the water, only the line of pollarded willows along the bank. Since they had blocked up the hedge there was no way out from the lawn at this point. If there had been she would have gone down to the river, to throw bits of twig into the stream and watch them float away. There was only one way out now, on this side; through the wooden door in the brick wall of the kitchen garden.

She walked back the way she had come, deciding to try the door in case Wilson had left it unlocked for Trevor to bring out the goats. She had not

much hope; they were all so careful to keep her on the narrow track they had chosen for her. But it was worth trying.

The door was locked, as she had known it would be. She wandered back up the centre path of the kitchen garden, and it occurred to her to ask Hugh what really was the matter with Hilary. She would not need to go in; just tap on the glass, and make him come to the door.

She reached the hothouse, and felt immediate disappointment. Hugh had gone. Well, perhaps he had not gone. He might be bending down under the wooden tables on which the pots were arranged. She went close to the door and looked in through the glass.

Hugh was there, but not bending, or digging at the boxes of loam, or picking up something from the floor. He was lying on the ground, quite still. From time to time his chest heaved and a few bubbles appeared between his swollen lips. In between the breaths he made no movement at all.

Joyce opened the door cautiously. The hot damp atmosphere that she hated so much flowed out at her, closed round her head and sickened her. But instead of the earth smell and the smell of green leaves and the horrible, strange, sweet smell of the orchids, there were fumes of gas, acrid and choking. She recoiled from them quickly, shutting the door again at once. She knew now what was happening in the hothouse, because it had happened in the kitchen during the last winter. The boiler flue was blocked. When it had happened in the kitchen they let the fire out and sent for the sweep. And he found that a bird's nest had fallen down the chimney; it must have been built there in the summer, when the boiler was not used, only the immersion heater.

Joyce walked a little distance from the greenhouse, and then turned and stood looking back at it. She could see the flue that led out from the stove inside. It stuck out from the brick wall, then bent at an angle and stood up about two feet. There was a rounded wire cage on the top, but she saw that this was broken and had fallen away to one side.

When she had taken a look all round the garden to see that no one was there, watching her, Miss Morley fetched the gardener's short ladder from the tool shed and propped it against the wall. She climbed up and peered into the top of the flue.

It was certainly blocked, with a darkish lump of something. Joyce touched this with a finger. It did not burn her, so she took hold of it and pulled. The lump came out and fell to the ground. Climbing down the ladder she kicked it apart and stared at the contents. These were made up chiefly of old newspapers; she recognised the pictures and the names. Though she read little from choice, she was able to read and write quite well, printing her letters carefully. So she knew that the newspapers were those they read in the house. The rags had come from there, too, probably, though they were less recognisable. Anyway, this bundle had blocked the chimney and it had not been put there by a bird, like the nest in the case of the kitchen stove. Some

person had put this lump in the flue—on purpose.

Joyce Morley tiptoed up to the greenhouse and looked in at Hugh. He lay in the same position; she watched his mouth for the bubbles that came when he breathed. They did come, though the intervals were longer than before.

All at once she panicked. Blocked flues were dangerous. People lying like that were ill. Run to the house! Get help, quickly! Hugh hadn't smelled the gas because he had a cold! Run! RUN!!

But she did not move. Her natural impulse was stayed by the daydream that had of late taken possession of her. All this had been done on purpose. Hugh had to go, too. As she had helped in the case of Hilary, so now—

She went back to the rubbish she had taken from the flue, and carrying it to the garden incinerator, thrust it in among the other waste, and pushed it under with a stick. By the next morning it would be ash.

But there was something else she must do. She wanted to go back to her room. She was getting frightened. But there was something else. A nest—a real nest—like there had been in the kitchen chimney.

She remembered that Wilson's grandson had shown her a nest he had stolen from a tree. He had left it in the tool shed; she had seen it was still there when she fetched the ladder.

She found the nest, a large untidy affair, of twigs, chiefly. She carried it up the ladder and pushed it down the flue until it rested in the bend of the pipe. Then she put away the ladder and went back to the house.

She met Mabel in the hall as she went in. Mabel said, "Where have you been?"

"In the garden."

"Did you see Mr Hugh?"

"He is in the hothouse."

She went on up to her room, but she was restless with the sense of occasion. Two events of great dramatic importance had taken place in the house that day, and it was not a house where such things normally happened. Her twin step-brothers had both been stricken down. Those two substantial obstacles to the development of her daydream had been wiped out in the course of one day. She could not have believed it possible, and she was filled with overwhelming admiration for the author of these calamities. She had no doubt at all that Hilary would die, and that Hugh was by now quite dead.

Looking back on these events as she rested, knitting, and again watching the clouds, Joyce was filled with a great satisfaction. She had been right, and this did not happen to her very often. How easy it had all been. And no one would ever know the truth, as *she* knew it.

But there was much that Joyce Morley did not know of that day's fatal events and the effect they had on those who witnessed them at Marsden

House.

No one thought of making a search for Hugh until supper time, when Mrs Strongitharm, rendered uneasy by his very prolonged absence, and her knowledge of his great anxiety for his brother, sent Mabel out to find him.

Then the scenes of earlier that day were repeated and intensified. Orders and telephone calls, comings and goings, and a host of people arriving and trooping out to the kitchen garden.

The two daily maids, who had stayed on late out of consideration for Mabel, found themselves rewarded with this sequel, as they regarded it, to the earlier catastrophe.

"Twins can't stick it apart," Jean said, darkly.

"You don't mean suicide?" asked Rose, whose thoughts had not gone further than shock, bringing on a heart attack.

"It's not for me to say," replied Jean, "but you know as well as I do how he took Mr Hilary's collapse."

"White as a sheet," Rose agreed. "There was nothing to choose between them when the ambulance drove off. Uncanny, I thought it."

Jean nodded her head, gloatingly.

"The likeness always did upset me," Rose went on. "The features, I mean, not the figures and colouring. I mean to say, in babies and that, it's sweet to have two just alike in their little twin suits and all. But in grown men, elderly men at that, it's unnatural, to my way of thinking."

"It was unnatural them living here, idle, and all through the war, too. They weren't too old, then, to have done something useful."

"They were in some Government job in the early years," said Rose. "Besides, they must have been in their forties, then."

She was older than Jean, and born and bred in Farthing-on-Hone. She liked to give short histories of its inhabitants; sometimes, when facts were scarce, highly coloured by her own imagination. In the case of the Strongitharms, the only considerable family living so near the village, there was no need for her to invent. Marsden House was securely established, both in fact and legend.

But Jean persisted.

"All the same, living here with their step-mother, and that balmy girl of hers—"

"Miss Morley is much to be pitied," said Rose, severely. "Mr Hilary and Mr Hugh didn't have any choice. The house is theirs, I understand—"

"Was," corrected Jean, with relish.

"Mr Hilary isn't dead, yet. While there's life, there's hope. As I was saying, Mrs Strongitharm only has the use of it for her lifetime."

"And the money, too, I suppose?"

“I don’t know anything about the money,” said Rose, truthfully. “Even Mabel doesn’t know that, and she’s been with Mrs Strongitharm for twenty years and more.”

Jean thought this over. She had heard it before, but it always surprised her that anyone could stay in a job of that nature for as much as twenty years. Though she was over thirty herself, she still had hopes of marrying, even though the hopes diminished a little with each year that went by.

“Do you think she has expectations?” she asked.

“Who?”

“Mabel.”

Rose looked wise, as she always did when she could not give a ready answer. At last she said, “I wouldn’t know. Mabel’s a close one when she chooses. But it would be what she’d expect from people in their position.”

“Good job when they’ve gone, the lot of them,” said Jean, on a revolutionary impulse. “Too old-fashioned, by half.”

Rose, who knew herself to be very old-fashioned in this respect, was silent. And Jean learned no more of the Strongitharms just then.

But before they went, leaving the house for the night, Rose spoke to Mabel in the hall.

“I don’t envy you,” she said. “All alone with that pair.”

“I’m used to them both,” answered Mabel, calmly. “I ought to be, by now.”

“Aren’t you scared, with no one else here?” asked Jean.

“Scared? What of?”

The younger woman laughed nervously.

“I’d find it a bit spooky. Specially after what’s happened.”

“Was Mr Hugh’s—death—a heart attack?” asked Rose.

Mabel looked grim.

“Not exactly. Dr Matthews wouldn’t say anything. The ambulance men thought he was gassed.”

“There you are!” Jean was triumphant. “What did I tell you? Suicide. On account of Mr Hilary.”

“Gassed!” said Rose. “Out there in the garden?”

“In the hothouse. The coke boiler.”

“What a way to choose!” cried the irrepressible Jean.

“The ambulance men said it must have been an accident,” said Mabel. “Blocked flue, they said.”

“That sounds more likely,” said Rose.

But Jean found this impossibly tame.

“Accident, my foot,” she said. “If it wasn’t suicide, I’d say it was done deliberate.”

Mabel drew herself up stiffly.

“That’s not a thing that ought to be suggested in this house,” she said. “And I hope you won’t repeat it. Here or anywhere.”

Rose echoed this sentiment, but Jean tossed her head, and went home unrepentant.

Chapter Four

Joyce Morley, still nursing her belief in the appearance of a natural end for both her step-brothers, remembered with glee her own part in a certain sequel. She had been very clever, she considered, though she might not have been so daring if they had told her Hilary was still alive on the evening of Hugh's death. Never mind, he was dead in time to make the announcement true, after all, even if the date was two days out.

She broke off her thoughts to get up from the bed and measure her piece of knitting against the teddy bear's smooth ancient torso. The toy had lost nearly all its fur in the long years of Joyce's childhood, not yet over; never to be over while she lived. Only on the teddy's back was there a small remaining patch of golden fur, and that was shrinking, because it was the only part of him that Joyce liked to stroke. When she had measured the new jumper, and saw that she must now tackle the difficult problem of shaping arm holes, she put away the knitting, kissed the bear, and went back to the bed with him, laying him beside her on the pillow as she stretched herself out once more.

The white clouds outside her window floated back her memories of the day of Hugh's death.

After the second ambulance had gone away, a deep silence had fallen on the house. She had been restless as a result of all the excitement, and though Mabel had been to see her and had given her a soothing pill as usual, telling her it was nearly bedtime, and she might as well undress, she was very unwilling to do so.

In fact she had refused point blank and for once Mabel had not argued. She had simply said that her mother came first that day of all days, and she, Joyce, could get on with it. Mabel washed her hands of her.

Joyce rubbed her own hands gently together as she remembered the tired, exasperated expression on Mabel's face. When she was alone and no longer heard footsteps in the passage, she had opened her door to listen. Silence again. Nothing moving below. Why should there be? Rose and Jean must have gone home some time before.

She crept down the stairs, pausing every now and then to listen. Mabel was with her mother, washing her and putting her to bed. Unless there was a disturbance in the house, or a sudden noise, she would not interrupt her work. Joyce, creeping slowly down, holding the banister rail, planting her feet carefully on each step, was determined there should be neither.

She reached the hall and drew a noisy breath, then clapped her hand to her mouth and stared up at the silent landing she had just left. Silence still. She was safe.

She went into the small library, a room that had always been used exclusively by the twins. Here she found what she sought, the *Daily Telegraph* for that day. Mrs. Strongitharm took the *Times,* though she could not read it. Mabel had to read her the headlines after she was dressed in the morning, and then she chose those columns she thought might interest her, and Mrs Fawcett, when she came, read them at full length. The *Times* ought to be in the drawing room, unless it had remained upstairs.

Joyce left the library, shutting the door carefully and silently behind her, and went into the next room. Then, with both papers held together firmly to prevent them rustling, she climbed once more to her own room.

So far, so good. Now for the notices. Now to set the seal on her step-brothers' deaths, and announce to all the world, and particularly to that One whom she served, that all was well and the obstacles moved from their path.

She folded the papers to display the columns of Births, Marriages and Deaths. Here was the pattern, some long, some short. But it would cost money, and the money would have to come from her mother's purse, so they must be short notices, as short as possible.

Joyce read the instructions above the column. She could manage this sort of reading, when there was a purpose of her own behind it. She was quite good, too, at shopping, if she had a list to go by, and the prices marked at the side. She bent her whole will to her present task, and then, finding a clean sheet of writing paper in her desk, sat down to compose and order two obituaries.

"Strongitharm. On May 28th, suddenly, at Marsden House, Farthing-on-Hone, Hilary St John, aged 58 years.

"Strongitharm. On May 28th, suddenly, at Marsden House, Farthing-on-Hone, Hugh Evenett, aged 58 years.

"Please insert these tomorrow. Enclosed please find postal orders."

She went to bed, but not to sleep. The money must come from her mother's purse. By day it would be impossible to take it, because Mabel would be about, or one of the others. She must take it tonight when both Mabel and her mother were asleep.

She did not mind the dark: quite often when she could not sleep she would go for long slow walks about the darkened rooms and passages, doing no

harm, disturbing no one, merely expending the pent-up energy her feeble mind could provide with no true outlet.

So now she went quietly to her mother's room, her usual clumsiness controlled by her simple purpose. She found the handbag and took out the wallet of notes. It felt reasonably fat, she thought, as she carried it back to her own room. When she put on the light there and counted the notes, she found there were more than ten. She did not bother to count exactly, but took what she thought she needed and carried the wallet back. As she opened the door to her mother's room the second time, the old woman in the bed stirred and sighed and mumbled something. Joyce did not pause in what she was doing. Her mother could not see her, or get out of bed alone to find her. If she did not speak she was quite safe. It was a mode of conduct she often used; always successfully.

Before she finally got into her own bed to sleep she put the unfastened addressed envelopes and the notes into her handbag, and took the bag into bed with her. She hoped she would not sleep late in the morning, because she must be out of the house before Rose went up to take orders for the day from her mother. She was afraid she might sleep very soundly. She was tired, but happy.

In spite of her fears, or perhaps because of them, Miss Morley awoke at her usual time of seven o'clock. The sun was flickering on the wall through a gap in her window curtains. She got up at once to draw them back and to look out into the garden. Then she dressed slowly and deliberately, and went out.

It was her favourite time of day in the spring and summer. Later in the year when her room was dark until after eight, she stayed in bed, not liking the cold air and the twilit appearance. But the early hours of the summer drew her out to join the birds in the garden, busy with their early feed on the lawn; to wander among the rose-beds, drawing her fingers through the cobwebs, stretched glistening in the sun between stem and stem; to move from the deep pools of shade under the trees, not emptied yet of ice-cold night air, into the warm lakes of sunlight on the lawn, where she could lie down if she wanted to, or take off her sandals and move her toes about in the soft grass.

This morning she wandered about as usual, but kept near the house. She wanted to see Mabel draw the curtains in the downstairs rooms. When that happened, at about eight o'clock, she would know that her breakfast would soon be ready. Mabel always set it out for her in the dining room, before taking a tray up to her mother in bed. This morning she intended to eat her breakfast quickly and then set off for the village on her important errand. She would go the long way round by the road so as to avoid Rose and Jean, who always took the short cut across the fields, arriving at Marsden House together at nine.

She was watching a beetle climbing slowly up one of the stones of the rockery when she heard a footstep behind her and turned quickly. It was Wilson, the gardener.

"Good morning, Miss," he said, as he passed.

"Good morning," she answered, straightening herself to look at him. "Aren't you early?"

He did not answer, so she repeated her question, with some emphasis in her voice. He stopped and looked back.

"Perhaps I am, Miss," he said, soothingly.

"Why?"

Wilson was used to these pointless remarks, but he always found them trying. Particularly today.

"Why not?" he said, shortly. "If I chooses."

Joyce put out her tongue at his retreating back. Wilson was always rude to her, and so was his grandson, Trevor. Thinking of Trevor reminded her of the boy's nest, the one she had taken and pushed down the flue. She giggled, wondering if he would miss it, and pleased to think he would never find it again, Then, looking up, she saw Mabel, inside the drawing room, looking out at her. She waved gaily, and walked towards the house.

Wilson hung up his cap and jacket in the tool shed and went to the hothouse. He had heard the shocking news of the accident to Mr Hugh, and his early arrival this morning was prompted by concern for the orchids. A police officer, Sergeant Forrest, had called on him about nine the night before, giving him the horrible news, and asking about the stove. Sergeant Forrest had been to Marsden House, directly he received the report from the mortuary. He had found the hothouse door open, just as the ambulance men had left it. So, as he told Wilson, he did not expect to smell fumes, nor were there any, though the really dangerous gas, the monoxide, would still be lying close to the ground, as it always did. So he had not investigated inside, but had fetched a ladder and taken a look at the chimney, and he had found a nest in it. Had Wilson ever noticed birds around that chimney? Wilson assured him he never had.

The old man remembered Sergeant Forrest's guarded manner when he had asked him what sort of nest he had found. Forrest admitted that he did not know much of the habits of birds, but it must have been big ones that had built the thing he had found.

"I wouldn't have thought," Wilson had told him, "any bird would have gone for that flue. The stove is never out, night or day, year in, year out."

"It's out, now," the sergeant said. "The ambulance men saw to that."

And so Wilson had come early, to see what damage had been done and to

repair it if possible. He found a sad state of affairs inside the hothouse. The orchids were withering on their stems, the tropical ferns were drooping. As if this were not enough, several delicate plants had been broken or torn from the soil by the movements of the ambulance men in taking out the unconscious Mr Strongitharm. You couldn't blame them, Wilson decided, scratching his head ruefully. The place had been full of poisonous gas. But the plants were pretty well ruined, all the same, what with the cold, and the gas as well. Mr Hilary would be terribly upset when he came out of hospital. It was enough to give him another attack.

Wilson went up to the house to borrow a flue brush from Mabel. That was something he had forgotten to tell Sergeant Forrest: that he was in the habit of passing a brush up the hothouse flue every now and then.

"Is it safe to light it again?" Mabel asked, giving him the brush.

"It's been safe these twenty years and more."

"It's a mystery to me how it came to be blocked."

"Ah," said Wilson. "You've put your finger on the spot, there."

When she had finished her breakfast Joyce went up to her room. Mrs Stringer was there, making the bed.

"Shall I help you?" Joyce asked.

Mrs Stringer was agreeably surprised. Miss Morley was very changeable. One day she lumbered about the room as if she didn't see you at all, and the next she'd be as nice as pie, like this morning.

"Thank you," said Mrs Stringer. "Just hand me the cover, dear."

"Miss," said Joyce, stiffly, but she handed her the cover, and helped her to smooth it out over the bed. When this was done Mrs Stringer left the room at once, which was just what Joyce wanted. She must get away from the house while everyone was busy. Forgetting that she had on no stockings and only her garden sandals, she picked up her handbag and crept carefully downstairs, out of the house, and away.

She took the open road to the village. It was not so direct as the path across the fields, and Rose and Jean had by now arrived, leaving that route free to her, but she knew that the Post Office part of the Stores would not open until half-past nine, and she had time to waste.

On the outskirts of Farthing a small car passed her, going towards Marsden House. The occupant waved gaily to her. Joyce returned the gesture grudgingly. It was Mrs Fawcett, going to read the newspaper and the letters to her mother. Mrs Fawcett was always kind and always spoke to her politely, but Joyce disliked her. She was too cool, too self-sufficient, too patronising. Joyce could not have described her in these words, but she felt their meaning every time she encountered Mrs Fawcett. Her looks, too, disturbed Miss

Morley profoundly. Mrs Fawcett had one of those dark handsome faces that seem to demand a theatrical setting and footlights to render them natural. Partly this was due to her excessive and stagey make-up, but partly it was caused by her manner of dressing, which was always so completely appropriate to what she was doing, that it seemed to have been specially designed, not for general seasonal wear, but expressly for that one occasion. Her wardrobe was large enough to support this impression. Many people who knew her, and the larger number who regretted her prolonged stay in Hanningford, wondered how she could afford to live in this style, and were not without suggestions, mostly scandalous, about the provenance of her substantial income. Joyce Morley simply disliked her, but was always cowed by her mere presence into returning her bright arrogant overtures.

The car disappeared round a bend of the road and Miss Morley, when she had watched it out of sight, continued her way into the village. She stopped first at the sweet shop to buy butterscotch. Then holding the bag open in her hand, she went out into the street again, and looked about her.

Some small children were sitting on a grass patch, playing with sticks, which they were poking into each other's faces. They took no notice of Joyce, until she was standing over them, when they all became quiet, looking secretly at one another, half giggling, half afraid.

"Would anyone like some butterscotch?" Joyce asked.

"Oh, yes, please, miss."

Hands came up towards the bag, but Joyce held it away.

"I want someone to go to the Post Office for me, first," she said.

A little girl of about eight scrambled to her feet.

"Why aren't you at school?" asked Joyce. She had planned to use a younger child, expecting to find only such about.

"I had the chicken-pox. I'm to go back tomorrow."

"What's your name?"

"Joycie."

"That's my name, too," said Miss Morley. "Now, Joycie, I want you to go into Pullen's, to the Post Office counter, and hand them this paper, with the money inside it. I shall be in the butcher's, opposite. We'll meet again afterwards, and you can give me what they give you."

Seeing how astonished all the children were, Joyce said hurriedly, "I have to do the shopping quickly, so you must help me. I have to take the things home as soon as I can, or—or my mother will punish me."

All the children got up in a body and moved away together, looking back over their shoulders as they went. Miss Morley felt annoyed. They were making the whole thing conspicuous. She turned away herself, comforted to notice that there seemed to be no one else about in the street, except far away

old Mr Thompson, leaning on his stick, looking into the windows of the only draper, and a woman she did not know, dismounting from a bicycle in front of the fishmonger's.

When the children reached the Stores Joycie stopped the others with an imperious wave of her hand.

"Scram!" she said. The expression was popular at her school, and still had its effect among the little ones of the village. They hung back, nudging each other.

"I don't want anyone to know I'm doing it for *her*," said Joycie, "because she's balmy, see?"

When the little ones looked blank she hissed at them, "If she sees you watching me, she'll bite you-like a mad dog. She's spiteful. You look out!"

Appalled, the children scattered, and Joycie went into the Stores and presented her packet at the Post Office grille.

"Postal orders?" asked the young woman behind it.

Joycie nodded. Miss Morley had said it was all down on the paper and she was doing it for her mother, she said.

The postmistress, a newcomer to Farthing, stamped the orders, folded them into the instructions and handed over the change. Joycie left the shop feeling important. She felt she had earned her butterscotch, and though Miss Morley did not give it to her until they had walked together the whole length of straggling Farthing-on-Hone, in the end she received the whole bag, with instructions to share it with the little ones.

"She's balmy," Joycie repeated to them, settling down once more on the grass. "Fancy giving me all this lot just for getting her a couple of postal orders."

The little ones agreed, but thankfully. It was not often a balmy one came their way, and so profitably.

Meanwhile Miss Morley had left the village and set off down a narrow lane that turned from the main road beside "The Horse and Groom." This lane would take her to Little Farthing, two miles away, and across the old bridge, where there was another Post Office, housed at the tobacconist's. She knew that she was not so well known in Little Farthing, and here she proposed to get the second set of postal orders herself.

But her luck had changed. At Little Farthing she met the vicar's wife, Mrs Neame, who stopped her and talked to her with conscious benevolence, while Joyce struggled to avoid answering the all too searching questions. At last she could bear it no longer, so she said goodbye suddenly and brusquely, and lumbered away, her agitation making her more awkward than usual. The vicar's wife shook her head sadly, her sympathy passing to the afflicted Mrs

Strongitharm. Then she mounted her bicycle and rode off. Joyce walked on, furious and bewildered by the sudden change in her purpose.

But after a time she recollected herself. A farm boy was coming down the lane towards the village. Joyce sat down on the grass verge. As he passed she called to him and asked him to do an errand for her.

"What errand? I'm on a job for Mr Willis."

She explained the nature of the errand. He looked at her, suspicious of some trap.

"Why can't you do it yourself?"

"I've hurt my ankle."

"How d'you know I won't go off with the money?"

"I should remember you. You've just said you work for Mr Willis."

The boy nodded.

"All right. Will you stay here?"

"Yes."

He was back in ten minutes, whistling cheerfully. When she had the second set of postal orders safely in her hand, Joyce got up and walked quietly away.

"Hey! Hey!" the boy yelled at her. "What's the big idea? You haven't hurt your ankle at all."

Joyce said, over her shoulder, "It's better. It's rested."

"You never hurt it. What's the idea, sending me to the Post Office? Did you take the money, or what?"

Joyce wheeled round, her face working, anger and fear driving her into instant panic.

"How dare you!" she cried. "Go away! Go away this minute!"

But there was no need to drive him off. One look at that distorted face was enough. The boy ran, and did not stop running until he arrived at the gates of the farm where he worked.

"Scatty!" he said to himself, with a little shudder, and he decided that on no account would he ever say what a silly business he had let himself in for.

But Joyce walked back up the lane to Farthing-on-Hone, stopping once when she was quite alone on a straight stretch of the road, to put the money orders into their prepared envelopes. She posted them in the pillar-box in the wall of "The Horse and Groom," and turned towards home.

About a mile from Marsden House a car drew up beside her and a man's voice said, "Can I give you a lift, Miss Morley?" Her heart gave a great throb of joy. "Thank you, Mr Pusey." She got in beside him and he drove on.

"I am on my way to see your mother," he explained.

"About their wills, I suppose?" said Miss Morley, in a low voice. The joy of sitting near him made her feel rather faint. She dared not lift her eyes to his face, but kept them fixed on his strong hands on the wheel.

Mr Pusey was astonished at her quickness. He was always surprised when she showed a normal reaction, and especially at her disconcerting frankness.

"About your brother Hugh's will, yes," he said. "Hilary, thank heaven, is improving."

Miss Morley lifted her face at last and looked full at him with a tender smile. Mr Pusey, who had glanced sideways at her, received its full impact. The car swerved dangerously, but the road was empty.

"Poor Hilary," said Joyce. "He is desperately ill, isn't he?"

"Please God, he will recover."

Yes, thought Joyce to herself, as they drove on in silence. Yes, Hilary would go, too. And she would help. She knew of a way to do it. Tomorrow she would take Hilary the *Telegraph* and show him the two notices, of Hugh's death and his own.

That was how she planned it, Miss Morley remembered, and that was how she had made it appear to happen. But, as with Hugh, it had not all fallen out just as she intended. Never mind, she had helped to make things safe, with Hugh and with Hilary. Now she need only wait for her happiness. How wonderful it would be when she could sit beside him always, in his car and in his house, watching him, loving him, and hearing his kind strong voice praising her and thanking her, for ever.

Chapter Five

Unexpectedly quickly, Marsden House began to recover from the double calamity that had fallen upon it. The household took its colour from Mrs Strongitharm, whose views on behaviour had never been modified by her growing infirmity. She herself became slowly less capable of physical effort and movement, but her mind was brisk, and her hand firm in the control of her household. After two days of disaster, two hammer blows of a cruel fate, she was for a time prostrated. She kept to her room and sent for Dr Matthews. But she did not stay in bed, and by the end of the week she was downstairs again at her usual time each morning. She made it very plain that the routine of life at Marsden House, having been ordered by her all these years, would continue there as long as she lived.

"And them not even in their graves yet, poor gentlemen," said the sentimental Rose, on the Friday.

Jean nodded.

"The inquest isn't till Monday," she said. "A double inquest, they say it'll be, though there was two days between them, and different causes. So they say."

"Well, there couldn't have been more different causes," said Rose, "unless it was heart attacks after all. But nobody believes that, except her."

"I bet she knows in her heart of hearts it wasn't."

"Well, don't ever breathe a word in her hearing to the contrary. Remember what Mabel told us."

"Mabel's on her side."

"And why not, I should like to know?"

The discussion, having reached this degree of obscurity, was dropped. But they both knew what they had meant, and they understood one another. Outwardly, Marsden House must be dignified in sorrow, its grief restrained rather than hidden. The two men, whose ineffectual lives had been spent there, except for brief excursions to school, to university, and to Whitehall, would be mourned with moderation, and allowed, very gently, to slide into oblivion.

Diana Fawcett, who had attended regularly every morning, felt a grudging admiration for her employer. True, she had been turned away early on Tuesday, the day she had passed Miss Morley in the road. Looking back, she understood why that dreadful creature had been out on the loose. Of course it was because Hugh's death had upset them all so much. But not enough to

cancel her visit altogether. Mabel had been ordered to ring her up, give her the news, and tell her Mrs Strongitharm wanted her as usual. She had found the old woman shaken, but very brave. There had been three or four letters to read aloud, and the answers to take down and copy out. That was all on that day. Mrs Strongitharm did not want to hear the news.

Diana Fawcett was in the house barely an hour, so she had left in her little car before Mr Pusey arrived, bringing home Miss Morley.

On Wednesday there had been more letters to answer, and again Mrs Strongitharm was not interested in the outside world.

The next day, with the added shock of Hilary's end, which had been reported, together with his brother's, in the evening newspapers, Mrs Fawcett expected some definite collapse. But the opposite was the case. She rang up Marsden House herself this time, to offer her renewed sympathy and to ask when Mrs Strongitharm would be likely to want her. Mabel told her she was expected, as usual, that morning. She found a heap of letters, unopened, and a note in Mrs Strongitharm's wobbly handwriting, slanting in all directions across the paper, giving her a standard answer to all letters of sympathy. When she had dealt with the correspondence, Mabel told her, madam would like to speak to her upstairs in her bedroom.

The letters provided two hours work. Coffee was brought in by Jean halfway through. Diana Fawcett tried to get a few human details from the girl, but was unsuccessful. Mabel's warning had substance, and anyway, as Jean said to Rose in the kitchen, later, "I don't like her. Never did. Nosey bitch!"

"It's good of them to come like they do, voluntary," said Rose, who liked to think well of people. "I'm all for the W.V.S. myself."

"Set of snobs," Jean answered. "That's all *she* does it for. To put herself in with them. Divorced, isn't she?"

"We don't know which way round it was," said Rose. "More likely she divorced him. It's more usual."

"Don't you believe it!" Jean laughed. "You've only got to look at her."

When the letters were done, Mrs Fawcett went up to the landing and knocked on Mrs Strongitharm's door. Mabel opened it, standing back for her to go in.

"Is that you, Mr Pusey?" said the old woman, in her strong voice.

"No, it's me. Diana Fawcett."

"Ah, yes, of course. Come over here to the window, my dear. Stand in the light. You are wearing blue, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"A pretty colour. I wish I could see the whole dress."

Mrs Strongitharm sighed. She was sitting in an armchair by her open window, and was dressed in black herself. As she spoke she fingered a gold

watch that she wore hanging from a brooch fastened to her bodice. Diana always found it strange that she continued to wear this watch, when she could no longer tell the time by it. Of course it must be a family heirloom, a brooch-watch that size and shape, so thoroughly Victorian. Pathetic, in a way. She looked across the room at Mabel, busy making up the bed, and waited, not knowing what to say.

"There were a lot of letters, I suppose, about all this—business?"

"Yes. There were about thirty. I didn't count them."

"People are very kind. They were not my sons, as you know."

Again there did not seem to be any suitable answer, and again Mrs Fawcett waited. But this time she found a chair for herself and sat down.

"Have you got the newspaper there?"

"I have got both. The *Times* and the *Telegraph*."

A shade of distress, or was it simple annoyance, crossed the wrinkled face.

"Mabel, I thought I said—"

"Yes, madam. I rang up yesterday to the newsagent, to say we wished to discontinue the gentlemen's paper."

"You had better telephone them again and see they understand."

"Yes, madam."

"I will have the *Times* as usual, Mrs Fawcett. I have not had any of it yet today. Not even the headlines. Mabel was too busy. Their clothes, you know. One has to dispose of—"

She broke off, checking the flow of confidences, composing herself to listen. Mrs Fawcett opened the paper at the centre page, and began to read. For half an hour the old woman listened attentively. Then, quite abruptly, she stopped the easy flow of Diana's cool voice, thanked her, and bade her good morning. This time Mrs Fawcett's car passed Mr Pusey's in the drive. They waved gaily to one another.

On the Friday Mrs Fawcett was later than usual. Jean opened the door to her.

"Mrs Strongitharm is in the library," she said.

"The library?"

"Yes, m'm. Mabel has all the letters in there. She's been reading them to her."

Sharp annoyance broke up the smooth surface of Mrs Fawcett's mask, but she said nothing. Jean reported in the kitchen later, "She didn't half look mad when I told her madam was up and dressed. Nearly cracked her make-up."

Diana went into the library. She said good morning in her usual way, giving neither explanation nor apology for her lateness. Mrs Strongitharm

stared severely in her direction, returned her greeting and then continued, "Will you repeat the last piece of that letter, Mabel. My attention was disturbed."

Mrs Fawcett bit her lip, but said nothing.

"Thank you, Mabel," said Mrs Strongitharm, when the latter had finished reading a letter of florid condolence. "How many more are there?"

"About six, madam."

"Give them to Mrs Fawcett, please."

"Yes, madam."

"That will be all just now, Mabel."

"Thank you, madam."

Diana Fawcett watched her go. She was always a little afraid of Mabel. It was totally beyond her power to get behind that perfect façade of willing, respectful service. She had never in her life employed a well-trained, superior servant, only a succession of half-competent daily helps, who treated her with the easy familiarity of modern social conditions. Mabel was an anachronism, like her mistress, but none the less formidable on that account. It annoyed Diana to think she could never persuade Mabel to tell her any of the things she would like to know, and it annoyed her more to realise what Mabel would think of her were she to try to do this.

"We will finish the letters," said Mrs Strongitharm, "and then I will go into the drawing room while you write the answers. There will not be time to read the paper, but Mabel has given me the headlines."

"I'm sorry—" Diana began, feeling obliged at last to defend her lateness.

"It does not matter," said Mrs Strongitharm, quietly. "It is a voluntary service, and I much appreciate your regularity."

Mrs Fawcett reddened. There was an implied rebuke in the old woman's answer, and a hidden insult, too. She could not have explained this, but she felt it sharply, and drew in her breath.

"Please don't bother to explain," said Mrs Strongitharm, whose hearing was acute, enhanced by her blindness. "I repeat, I am most grateful for any time you can spare me. Now, let us finish the letters."

Rebellious, but cowed, Diana Fawcett gave in. There was no trace of conflict in her voice as she began to read.

"That is all, is it?" Mrs Strongitharm asked, when the voice stopped.

"Yes."

"There were two I will dictate different answers for. Otherwise use the form of words I gave you at the beginning."

Mrs Strongitharm's memory was remarkable, Diana thought. All that conglomeration of formal sympathy, mostly in identical phrases, and half of it

from distant friends and relations; and she could pick out and remember just the two that needed special answers. Without even stopping her as they came up, or telling her to put them on one side.

Diana made a note of the two names, and waited. As nothing happened, she said, "What would you like me to write?"

"I have changed my mind," said the old woman. "I feel too tired to invent new letters. The one you have sent to the others will do for these two as well. And I think I will stay here. Perhaps you will not mind writing at the bureau in the drawing room. I am expecting Mr Pusey."

Diana got up and walked into the hall. As she did so she heard a car in the drive. There was a faint smile on her face as she opened the drawing room door and went in.

Mr Pusey was greeted by Mabel, who opened the front door to him.

"Madam is in the library, sir. She is expecting you."

Mabel had seen Mrs Fawcett go into the drawing room as she came down the stairs, and had rightly concluded that her mistress was still where she had left her.

"I'm not late, I hope," said Mr Pusey, insincerely.

"Oh, no, sir."

"Is she free? There is another car in the drive."

"Mrs Fawcett is answering the letters, sir. She has taken her instructions."

Mr Pusey nodded. Mabel looked at him severely. He must have recognised Mrs Fawcett's car; she was known to be a friend of his. It looked bad for him to make such a silly remark. It looked as if all she'd heard—

Mrs Strongitharm was pleased to see Mr Pusey. She sent Mabel away to bring sherry and biscuits for the solicitor, and spoke mainly of the weather until they arrived. When Mabel had again left them she said at once, "And now tell me what the present position is."

"With regard to—?" Pusey hesitated. There were several topics they must discuss, all most urgent.

"My step-sons, first. The funeral."

"I have no information on that. The inquest, as you know, was adjourned, after formal identification of the remains. It is a matter for the police and the coroner. But even if the inquest is adjourned again, I imagine the coroner will make an order for burial on Monday. Provisionally, the funeral is arranged for Tuesday, I believe."

"That is what I was told. Why should it take so long to establish the cause of an accident?"

"You mean in Mr Hugh's case?"

"I mean in both cases," said Mrs Strongitharm, sharply. "Hilary must have been shown that newspaper by accident. That stupid nurse, I imagine. It was too much for his weak heart."

"About those notices," said Mr Pusey, carefully. "Do we know who put them in?"

"We do not. Everyone in this house denies having anything to do with it. I understand the police have been here, making inquiries. I did not see them, as there was nothing I could say."

"Quite."

There was a pause, and Mr Pusey waited. Presently Mrs Strongitharm went on. "And now tell me how matters stand about the wills."

"I think there should be no difficulty. It is all perfectly plain. Your late husband left the house and the bulk of the estate to you in trust for your lifetime, with reversion to his sons, jointly. He does not seem to have considered them apart, and I suppose he was right. They would have stayed together always, while they lived. In the event of their predeceasing you, you inherit absolutely. Their wills do not come into it as far as you are concerned, though you may like to know that they both intended to do something for Miss Morley. As things are, your late husband's property will be yours. I take it you will want to alter your own will later on."

"Yes," said Mrs Strongitharm. "That is really the most important thing I must discuss with you. When it was only a question of leaving my small private income to Joyce—"

"As your present will provides for," said Mr Pusey.

"Exactly. It would have been enough to place her in the care of some kind person. But now she will be far too well off for that. She will need much more protection. I shudder to think how she might be exploited. You see, she is far from being certifiable, poor child. In many ways she is quite sensible, even shrewd, over her little shoppings and so forth. And quite dependable in that way, too. She can manage money and take the correct change, if she is told how much things cost. But she is very easily upset and confused, and then she has her bouts of hysteria."

"Do you mean that Miss Morley might want to manage her own affairs in the future?"

"I'm sure she will. Legally, she will be entitled to, won't she?"

"Yes. Unless she is certified."

"I could not allow that," said Mrs Strongitharm. "And I am sure no doctor or magistrate would do it. In some ways, though it may seem dreadful to say this, I could wish she had been worse handicapped than she is. She would have realised less about herself. As it is, she is in a constant state of rebellion against us all, against anyone who has attempted to restrain her, or guide her, or advise."

Mr Pusey waited. Mrs Strongitharm talked on, gradually saying less, and pausing longer between her sentences. When she was silent and a sufficient time had gone by for his next words to gather all the weight he needed, he said, "You will have to appoint a guardian for Miss Morley. A discretionary trust—"

Mrs Strongitharm turned her head in his direction, her eyebrows raised.

"But of course. That is exactly what I have been saying."

It was not, but Mr Pusey could not tell her so. Instead, feeling a little deflated, he murmured, "If I can be of any possible assistance—"

"Of course you can. That is why I asked you to call today."

Mr Pusey began to feel happier. He had not yet been able to make his splendid suggestion, but the opportunity was obviously coming nearer. Mrs Strongitharm's next words, however, destroyed all his hopes.

"I have written to my younger brother," she said. "He lives in Somerset and we do not often meet these days. But I have asked him to become Joyce's guardian after I have gone. I am waiting to hear from him."

"I see."

Mr Pusey saw, only too clearly. He saw danger ahead, even disaster. He saw, besides, that Mrs Strongitharm did not entrust all her letters to Diana Fawcett. Otherwise, he thought he might have heard of this move. He had had no inkling of her intention. He suppressed his sudden panic, and fought for time.

"You don't think someone who knows her, someone near at hand, would be better?"

"In many ways, yes. But I have no relations living near here. My first husband's people are in the north, and after I married again they gradually stopped writing. I never knew them very well."

"Friends, then? Or—or business connections?" suggested Mr Pusey.

"I have none who would have enough patience and sympathy with the poor child's affliction," said Mrs Strongitharm, firmly.

"If," said Mr Pusey, taking the plunge at last, "you considered me in any way suitable, I should be most willing to help."

"You?" said Mrs Strongitharm, in genuine astonishment.

Mr Pusey bowed his head, forgetting that she could not see the gesture.

There was another silence in the room.

"Joyce likes you," said Mrs Strongitharm at last, in a considering voice. "You would be able to prevent undesirable people forcing an acquaintence with her in order to exploit her."

"Exactly. The Trust I propose would provide—"

"But she probably would not be living in Farthing. In fact I shall most

likely sell this house, which is much too large and expensive. So you would not be in her neighbourhood any longer."

There was a little pause. Mr Pusey, looking rather pale, opened and shut the brief case he held on his knees.

"You said something about a kind person taking her in," he reminded her at last.

"Are you suggesting taking her in yourself, Mr Pusey? You are not married, are you? How could you—"

Mr Pusey blushed violently.

"I was not suggesting that," he said. "But it occurred to me that you might find a place for her somewhere near here, with one of your friends, or perhaps with one of the doctors. That often used to be done, but one doesn't hear of it much now, since the Health Service started. People won't pay anything for any kind of medical attention if they can help it. They expect the Government to provide institutions, and relieve them of all responsibility and expense."

"I think I told you it would be impossible to find a place for Joyce anywhere in Farthing, or Hanningford either, for that matter."

Mrs Strongitharm's voice had taken on a severe note. Mr Pusey controlled his temper with difficulty.

"We must hope that my brother will consent to become her guardian when I am gone," said Mrs Strongitharm, in a warmer tone. "He is much younger than I am; ten years younger. It would be far the best arrangement, I think."

"Perhaps. If that is what you would like, and Miss Morley is fond of her uncle, and willing to be guided by him."

"She hardly knows him. I doubt if she remembers seeing him. It must be seven years ago at least. But I have asked him, if he decides to agree, to come and spend a few weeks here with us. I hope and pray he will do this. I'm afraid the burden of these frightful events may crush me. Dr Matthews tells me I must get all the support I can find."

"You can always count on me," said Mr Pusey, gallantly.

"Thank you. You are very kind."

Mr Pusey felt baffled and obscurely snubbed, in much the same way as Diana Fawcett, earlier. He concluded that his visit had come to an end, so he got up briskly, asking at the same time if there was anything else he could do for her.

"No, thank you," said Mrs Strongitharm. "I will let you know if my brother consents, and we must then draw up this deed you suggest, or put it all into the new will I shall have to make. But there is no hurry for that, is there?"

"No," said Mr Pusey, with unnecessary emphasis.

"Always provided my health does not get worse," added Mrs Strongitharm. "I rely on Dr Matthews." "Naturally."

Mr Pusey let himself out of the house. Mrs Fawcett's car was still in the drive, and he concluded that either she had not finished the letters or had to take them back to Mrs Strongitharm to be signed.

When he had closed the front door behind him he stood for a few seconds on the steps, considering. He was a little under average height, but his figure had not thickened with the onset of middle age, and so he looked taller than he was. His dark hair had thinned almost to baldness on top of his head, but it showed no grey anywhere.

He took out his handkerchief to polish his glasses. It was a gesture he had developed deliberately in his office; a delaying tactic, for use with difficult clients. It had become a habit with him when he was perplexed or annoyed—as now. The old woman's plan for Joyce was infuriating, since he had hoped to find himself in the position of legal guardian. It was also disturbing. He had administered the Strongitharm estate ever since he took over his present practice from the retiring solicitor who had first been entrusted with its affairs. He imagined and hoped that nothing had happened to shake Mrs Strongitharm's confidence in him. He did not see how this could be possible, but her present plans made him most uneasy. At any rate, with the deaths of both the twins, he was now sole executor, both of their wills and their father's. He ought to be able to avoid trouble.

He put on his glasses again, and was able, once more, to see into the distance. But what he saw gave him no sort of comfort. For as he stood there, desperately trying to shake off his anxieties, he caught sight of Miss Morley at the corner of the drive. She was standing, half-hidden by the bushes, and gazing in his direction with a curious rapt expression on her face. A little wave of disgust swept through him. All this fuss, all this thought, about the future of that scatty object. Why didn't they allow them to be put quietly to sleep as children? They had no future, anyway.

Joyce began to move out from the bushes, so Mr Pusey hurried to his car, started it up, and drove off, lifting his hand to her in polite greeting as he passed.

Miss Morley stood in the drive and watched the car pass out of sight. Her hands were clasped at her breast and she could feel the strong rapid beats of her heart quite plainly. Her face wore a gentle expression that composed her heavy features, so often distorted in her sad battles for understanding. It was the face of a woman deeply in love, dedicated to submission, content with the blissful vision of the beloved, and not yet demanding recognition of her state.

Chapter Six

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Fiona Goddard was enjoying life in the country. She had married Bill when his career as a surgeon had hardly begun, and for five years he had moved among various hospitals, taking registrar jobs of slowly increasing seniority, and building up his qualifications and experience. Finally there had been the assistant surgeonship for three years, and now, at last, he was a full consultant surgeon, at a hospital recently enlarged and modernised, and run by an unusually sympathetic and competent Management Committee. The hospital was situated in a country town large enough, with its surrounding rural area, to provide Bill with a sufficient number of interesting cases in his chosen speciality.

His satisfaction with his lot was fully shared by Fiona, who in her turn was thankful that the years of drudgery and uncertainty were over, and who rejoiced to find herself and their three small children living in an attractive house, with a pretty garden, on the outskirts of Little Farthing; near enough to Hanningford for Bill to answer urgent calls from the hospital, but far enough away for her to make her social life in the village rather than the town.

She had, very soon after her arrival, found her neighbours both friendly and welcoming. Foremost among them was Mrs Neame, the vicar's wife, always on the lookout for young wives who would take an interest in the life of the parish. Fiona soon found herself an active member of the Women's Institute, and associated with the W.V.S.

Bill Goddard's eyebrows went up when he heard of her commitments.

"Now we really have taken root," he said, smiling at her a little wryly. "Middle age gallops on."

"Don't be silly. You wouldn't want me to have nothing to do."

"You used to have much too much to do."

"That was before we got Gerda. Or Mrs Beard."

Bill nodded. The Swedish girl took most of the children's care off Fiona's hands. She was a treasure, and the only fear was that she would marry in England, or discover how excellently she spoke English, and go back to Sweden to cash in on her accomplishment.

"Mrs Beard is a direct gift from the W.I.," added Fiona, complacently.

"All right. You win. As long as you don't make me attend a fête in aid of."

Fiona guaranteed his exemption.

Naturally the dramatic events at Marsden House had caused a considerable stir in Little Farthing, where the Strongitharm family was well known. Both the Marsden dailies had relations and friends in that village as well as at Farthing-on-Hone, and before long some strange stories began to circulate in both places. These came to Fiona through Mrs Beard, and she relayed them to Bill. But, to her great disappointment, he refused to discuss them with her.

"The police are in charge," he kept repeating.

"Bother the police! Surely it can't be difficult to decide whether Hugh Strongitharm gassed himself on purpose, or not?"

"It must be very difficult to decide. And he isn't my pigeon, anyway."

"You are still sore about Hilary, aren't you?"

"I am still waiting to know what happened, or rather, how it happened."

Fiona could get nothing more out of him, but her curiosity grew, as the stories she heard at the Institute and from Mrs Beard became more and more far-fetched, melodramatic and absurd.

"Surely it can't be true that the brothers were at loggerheads over this Mrs Fawcett?" she asked the vicar's wife, who was having tea with her.

Mrs Neame was shocked.

"Have you been told that, too?" she said, in a pained voice.

"Oh, yes. With lurid detail. And that they quarrelled violently and that brought on Hilary's illness, and then Hugh, in a fit of remorse, gassed himself."

"What wicked nonsense! The brothers were absolutely devoted. This suicide theory is too utterly ridiculous. I can't think who started it. It must have been an accident; a dreadful accident, but nothing more than an accident."

Mrs Neame spoke with great conviction.

"And Hilary's death?" Fiona asked.

"Probably his illness. But we know absolutely nothing about that, except what poor Joyce Morley says."

Her voice held a note of question that made Fiona say, quickly, "I don't know any more than you. Bill can't ever tell me anything about his patients, of course."

"No, of course," said Mrs. Neame, bowing to known etiquette, but regretting it.

"I wonder why the inquests have been adjourned again," said Fiona, to change the subject a little. "And why the police seem to be holding things up."

Mrs Neame looked worried.

"There is this story Joyce tells, about the newspaper in Hilary's room at the hospital. And then the notices in the obituary column. Very nasty,

whoever put them in."

"Very odd," said Fiona. "The sort of thing an M.D. might think of. No one else, unless they were deliberately trying to be malicious."

"I don't see how Joyce could have done it," said Mrs Neame. "They watch her very closely. I think they are rather too hard on her. She is absolutely harmless. She makes faces sometimes, poor thing, and gets into states, but she has never struck anyone, or done anything that could be called spiteful. And she is perfectly trustworthy with children; she rather likes them, and some of them like her, unless they have been told to think her queer."

"I've heard that she has been much more peculiar since all this happened," said Fiona. "My Mrs Beard knows the two girls who work at Marsden House. They say she wanders about the garden more than she used to, and spends a lot of time just sitting in the bushes near the drive, as if she was waiting or watching for something. But they don't know what."

"The village people always exaggerate. They love a dramatic situation. Look at the way they turned out for the double funeral. They have often made up quite fantastic tales about Joyce Morley. It's superstition, partly, my husband says. The mentally afflicted have always held a special place, and have always been believed to have special powers. The feeling about them persists, in spite of civilisation and Christianity. I think poor Joyce is ordinary enough. Simply underdeveloped. About twelve years old, she always seems to me."

"I've never met her," Fiona said, wondering if she would be able to take this simple charitable view herself.

"I saw her the day after it all happened," said Mrs Neame, "I mean the morning after Hugh's death, when the report from the hospital about Hilary was still very grave. Joyce was here in Little Farthing. I was surprised to see her out walking so early, but of course they must have been quite distracted at Marsden House. She told me she was shopping for Mabel. That would be quite likely. She shops very well, if they tell her exactly what to get."

"Mabel is a sort of keeper, isn't she?"

"Mrs Strongitharm's personal maid. She came here with them. Joyce had a nurse at that time, but she left quite soon. She didn't like living in the country. That was about fifteen years ago, or more. Yes, it must have been just before the War. Mabel stayed on. She looks after them both. Really rather wonderful, that sort of devotion. I often feel sorry for her. It must be very unrewarding."

Fiona, feeling slightly ashamed of her own cynicism, wondered how much the devotion was worth, in security, comfort and hard cash. She decided that Mabel was probably not much to be pitied, though greatly to be admired. She changed the subject again.

"Then you don't think Mrs Fawcett was a snake in the grass at Marsden?" she asked. "That's just another myth without foundation?"

Mrs Neame hesitated.

"I don't think I ought to discuss Mrs Fawcett," she said. "I hardly know her."

Fiona felt rebuked, but her curiosity persisted. And at the next opportunity that came her way, a small cocktail party in Hanningford, she managed to guide her conversation in the right direction.

"Mrs Fawcett?" said the wife of the senior ear, nose and throat surgeon. "Haven't you met her yet?"

"No."

"You probably will. Here and now. Or rather, shortly. She makes a habit of coming to parties late. Better entrance when the ranks have thinned a little. I know I'm being catty. She has that effect. I believe she was actually on the stage at one time."

"Quite a lot of people have been," said Fiona, lightly.

She had heard that her companion had a critical turn of mind, and was prepared to exploit it.

"Oh, I don't hold it against her. I don't hold anything against her," the surgeon's wife persisted, her acid voice belying her words. And then she added, "Why so interested?"

"Because she has a good deal to do with the Marsden House setup," said Fiona, truthfully.

"Ah! The Strongitharm twins!" The eyes looking into Fiona's twinkled with malice. "Poor old Bill blotted his copybook there a bit, Guy tells me."

"Guy told you wrong," said Fiona, coldly. She decided that Marjorie Banks was no friend of hers, and that her report on Mrs Fawcett was probably completely false.

"Here she comes!" said Marjorie, quite oblivious of the effect she had made. "The Queen of Sheba, but without her Solomon."

Fiona saw a slim figure in the doorway. Her entrance seemed to have cleared a space about her, and she stood there, smiling, looking about for her hostess, not moving, but holding the precious moment when all eyes were drawn to her. She wore a dress so straight, so simple, and so elegant, that it made all the pretty flowing silks in the room look dowdy. Her black hair waved closely, in expensive casualness, about her small head. The mask of her makeup was without a flaw.

"And who is Solomon?" Fiona asked, fighting against her inclination to be impressed by Mrs Fawcett's appearance.

"Now that's a question we've all been asking ever since she arrived in Hanningford. We hurry after the various scandals, but we never seem quite to catch up on them. At the moment he is thought to be a local solicitor, a Mr Pusey."

"Is there no Mr Fawcett?"

"Who can say? Not in Hanningford, there isn't."

Later that evening Bill Goddard listened to Fiona's description of the party, and expressed his pleasure that an emergency operation had kept him from it.

"Marjorie was in her usual scandalous form," said Fiona complacently. "But I think she's really a bit of a menace. I wouldn't trust her an inch, myself."

"That is the general opinion," said Bill. "Guy seems able to control her, though."

"It's probably knack," said Fiona. "I got myself introduced to the notorious Mrs Fawcett."

"Who is Mrs Fawcett, and why is she notorious?"

"You must have heard of her. She is our local mystery, on account of there being no obvious Mr Fawcett, and also because she chooses to appear as a kind of vamp or siren."

"I seem to have missed something after all," said Bill.

"I made a point of meeting her," went on Fiona, "because she goes to Marsden House every morning to read the newspaper to old Mrs Strongitharm."

Bill frowned.

"I don't care what you think," went on his wife. "I'm interested in these queer deaths and no one else seems to be. At least, nothing is being done, is it?"

"The fact that the inquests have been adjourned ought to show you that interest has not slackened, but increased."

Fiona looked at Bill; he turned his head away.

"Bill, what did really happen? To Hilary, anyway?"

But he only smiled at her, and said nothing.

There was nothing he could tell her. He felt that his own part in the story was over, but that did not justify him in telling what he knew. She must wait to learn the terrible, extraordinary facts at such time as the police decided to resume the inquest.

For the fact was that Hilary Strongitharm had been suffocated; deliberately, maliciously; suffocated with his own pillow, as he lay, weak and helpless after his haemorrhage, in his bed in the private ward at the Hanningford General Hospital.

Dr Matthews, who attended the postmortem examination of his former patient, the day after his death, at the Tukesbridge mortuary, brought the news

to Bill.

"Text book signs," he said. "Our local pathologist is so sure, he doesn't see any need to get in the Home Office chap. Why are all murderers so painfully ignorant? Do they think we know nothing, after all the centuries we have spent collecting signs and symptoms of disease and death?"

"They don't think at all," said Bill. "Not when they kill. Afterwards, perhaps, when they try to cover up."

"This one did some pretty silly covering up," said Dr Matthews. "Turning the pillow over was ridiculous. It simply called attention to the fact that someone else was there when, or just after, he died. Someone apart from the nursing staff, I mean."

"Not necessarily. Nurse Carr may have lied about the pillow. She was distinctly confused in her answers. And there was the nitwit, Miss Morley. She might have done anything, including leaving the *Telegraph* in his room."

"What exactly do you mean by that?"

Bill explained about Sister Wright's newspaper, which had mysteriously appeared in the ward waiting room, not having been taken there by any of the hospital staff.

"I think Miss Morley left her own *Telegraph* in Strongitharm's room, probably forgetting she had put it down there in the shock of seeing him dead. Aftewards she may have missed it, and been frightened of what she had done. Sister Wright says she did take her into her own room for a few minutes before moving her back into the waiting room. If Miss Morley was thinking of the *Telegraph*, she could easily have picked up Sister's. And that would be the one we saw in her hands. Then she had only to leave it behind when she left. None of us was watching her at that moment, were we?"

"No. But why should she be so concentrated on the newspapers?"

"I bet she read the obituaries. Perhaps that was why she went to the hospital, to try to see Hilary. Perhaps she wanted to find out if the second notice was true or not. It would be just like a low I.Q. to distrust what people told her and want to find out by seeing. Go to the spot, rather than ring up like a normal person."

Dr Matthews sighed.

"Poor woman. I feel ashamed of myself for resenting her, but I do resent knowing there is absolutely nothing to be done to help her."

"You shouldn't," said Bill, smiling. "The public may want us to be magicians. We shouldn't want it ourselves. Much too arrogant."

"All very well, for you," said Matthews. "You're only a sort of mechanic, yourself."

"And I thank God for it," said Bill, smiling. One could not resent Dr Matthews's professed distaste for surgery. He sent the stuff along all right,

with the minimum of delay. Bill already had a very high opinion of the elderly G.P.'s capacity.

This conversation took place within forty-eight hours of Hilary Strongitharm's death. Following it, Bill Goddard went up to the private wards again to see Sister Wright. He found her in a state of considerable agitation.

"I've just had the police up again," she said. "About five of them, photographs, fingerprints, and I don't know what. Turning the ward inside out, and upsetting my staff."

"It has to be done, I'm afraid, Sister. Mr Strongitharm did not die a natural death."

Sister Wright grew very pale.

"Someone made a mistake? What—?"

"I can't tell you," said Bill.

"There was no mistake made over his drugs," said Sister, "not by us, anyway. If it was the aspirin did it, he took that on his own. I didn't find it until he'd been in two days."

"I know. Anyway, it wasn't the aspirin."

"And it wasn't my nurses. Carr is a bit silly and loses her head sometimes, but she's a good girl and she never neglects an order. The fault's all the other way. Over-conscientious, sometimes. If it was the nursing, or anything to do with it, Nurse Barker ought to be asked."

Bill looked at her.

"That is why I wanted to see you, Sister. Nurse Barker says he did not see Mr Strongitharm at all on the morning of his death. And yet the barber reported that he saw him, in the ward, just after he'd finished shaving Mr Strongitharm."

Sister's face became as red as before it had been pale.

"Nurse Barker's telling a lie," she said, fiercely. "I saw him too, with my own eyes."

"Good."

This was exactly what Bill had hoped for.

"When did you see him?"

"I can't remember exactly."

"Before or after Miss Morley arrived?"

Sister Wright considered this.

"Before. No, after. Yes, it was after. I'd explained to her she couldn't go in to her brother until after you had been up. I settled her in the waiting room, and I was on my way up the corridor to find Nurse Carr and warn her to keep an eye on Miss Morley, because I could see she was a bit peculiar."

Sister paused and Bill nodded to her to go on.

"I looked into Mr Southam's room, but Nurse Carr wasn't there, so I came out and went to the end of the corridor, to the bathrooms. As I went round the corner, I saw Nurse Barker going into Mr. Strongitharm's room."

"I see. Have you any idea what time that was?"

"Not offhand. I can work it out more or less."

"Will you do that, please, Sister? It may be very important."

"Yes, sir. Can you tell me why it is important?"

Bill hesitated. Perhaps he ought not to say; on the other hand, Sister Wright's co-operation was going to be very important.

"Yes, I'll tell you," he said, slowly. "But you must promise me not to hand it on to anyone at all. Except the police, of course. They will probably ask you much the same things as I have."

"What has Nurse Barker to do with the police?"

"Perhaps nothing, perhaps a good deal."

"Why?"

"I told you. Because Barker says he is prepared to swear he never came up to the ward at all that morning, until after Mr Strongitharm was dead."

There was a long silence between them. Then Bill said again, "You are really sure you saw him?"

"I'm positive I saw him go into Mr Strongitharm's room."

"Sister, tell me exactly what you saw?"

"How d'you mean, sir?"

"You say you saw Barker. Did you see him full-face, or side-face, or what?"

Sister frowned.

"Both. No, side-face. He was just going into Mr Strongitharm's room. I remember thinking, 'He has remembered his mask today,' and being pleased, because I've had to speak to him about it."

Bill hid his excitement.

"Was he wearing a theatre cap as well as a mask?"

"No. That was how I knew it was Barker. His black hair."

"Yes. I see. He had on a gown, I suppose, over his uniform coat?"

"Yes. The usual theatre gown. He was going to pass a catheter, for the routine specimen."

"And then?"

"I went back along the corridor almost at once, and the red light was up. I didn't go in myself, because Mr Strongitharm was so touchy about having

anything done for him by any of us. I must say I didn't see Nurse Barker leave the ward. I had a few telephone calls to attend to at that time."

"Hospital calls? I mean, internal calls?"

"All except one. That was for Mr Strongitharm, or rather about him. Another inquiry from his solicitor, asking how he was, and when he would be able to see him."

"Persistent bloke, isn't he?"

Sister Wright looked severe.

"With one brother dead and the other so ill, I expect he felt responsible."

"He certainly took some trouble to impress that point of view on me the day before."

Sister's expression seemed to show that she found this not unreasonable. She had, in fact, felt a good deal of sympathy with Mr Pusey, who had waited most patiently to see Mr Goddard, and had shown no annoyance with the latter's very curt refusal to let him speak, even for a few minutes, with the surviving twin.

Bill did not pursue the subject of Mr Pusey with Sister. He merely repeated his warning about secrecy in the matter of Nurse Barker's visit to Mr Strongitharm, and his request fo a definite time for it. After that he left the private ward to continue his normal work.

But later in the day he saw Dr Matthews again, and later still the two men took their combined information to Detective-Inspector Stewart, of the County C.I.D.

Chapter Seven

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Detective-Inspector Stewart, of the Hanningford Division, was not at all happy over the case of the Strongitharm twins. Every step he took led to a crazy answer. To begin with, the main events had happened in the wrong order; in the wrong order, that is, to make easy sense. If Hilary had been suffocated at the hospital first, and Hugh in the greenhouse second, there would have been a coherent story to work on. Murder, followed by the suicide of remorse. But things had not happened that way. Hugh died first, when Hilary's life was by no means despaired of. Hilary was murdered two days later. No hidden feud between the brothers, therefore, was responsible, for Hugh was dead two days when Hilary was sent so crudely out of the world. And clearly, Hilary did not kill Hugh. Or if he did, blocking the chimney of the greenhouse before he was taken ill so suddenly and unexpectedly, then his own death was certainly not suicide. So that theory fell down before it was even formulated.

But there seemed to be no one in the family circle who could remotely be suspected of causing these deaths. Or was there? Certainly not old, blind Mrs Strongitharm herself. Presumably not her mentally deficient daughter, though the Inspector had reservations in regard to her. Constable Plum at Farthing-on-Hone had expressed very forcibly the village people's superstitious fears of abnormality. Inspector Stewart, repudiating these, nevertheless kept his mind open to the possible results of eccentricity. After all, it was Miss Morley who had seen Hugh first in the greenhouse, though she had clearly not understood his predicament. Or had she? And kept back her knowledge? Certainly, she was at the hospital at the time of Hilary's murder. Coincidence? Probably. But one to be kept in mind.

For, to return to the all-important question of motive, who was there with any possible grudge against the twins? They had no enemies the Inspector could discover. They were not the sort of men to make enemies. Or friends, either, for that matter. Since old Mr Strongitharm's death, Marsden House had not been famed for its hospitality. Really, not since his first wife died. She had been beautiful and lively and extravagant, qualities she had not conferred on her sons. There had been grand parties in those far-distant days, well remembered by the older people of Farthing. But the second Mrs Strongitharm, though correct and punctual in her rather dull cocktail parties, had never entertained on the old lavish scale, and after her husband's death and the onset of her affliction, hardly at all. The twins did not encourage it,

and Miss Morley, as she grew older, proved to be a growing embarrassment. She had a way of turning up among the guests and disturbing them with her childish conversation and her sudden unpredictable fits of hysteria. Since the War, the Inspector found, Marsden House was visited only by one or two of the neighbouring families, and its inmates went out less and less often.

"What about the staff, sir?" Detective-Sergeant Forrest suggested, as he and the Inspector reviewed the meagre evidence yet once more.

"You're assuming they were both murdered?"

"I thought that was taken for granted."

"You can't take anything for granted. But I agree it looks like it. There wasn't any member of the staff at the Hanningford General the morning Hilary was suffocated, and that death was certainly murder, whatever the other was. They have all been accounted for, and they were all at Marsden House, the two dailies, Miss Mabel Thorne, and Wilson in the garden."

"I was just thinking," said Forrest. "Suppose one of them thought Hilary was going to die anyway, and decided to get rid of Hugh, so that they'd both be gone. Doesn't the old lady get the property now? Mightn't that be in favour of this Mabel, who's been with her nearly a lifetime, wanting to make sure in good time? After all, in the natural way, Mrs Strongitharm would die before her step-sons. If Mabel looks to get anything when the old lady dies, mightn't she work for a larger legacy that way?"

"I doubt it. Legacies are all very well in their way, but people don't go killing right and left on the off chance of getting one. Besides, you can't get over the fact that Mabel was at Marsden House that morning, and we've proved she never left it. She was miles away from the hospital when Hilary was suffiocated."

"You can't get over that," agreed Forrest.

"It's no good going round and round in circles," said Inspector Stewart. "We've got to take the two deaths separately to begin with, and then see if we can fit them together with a common murderer and a common motive."

"Common?" said Sergeant Forrest, in a surprised voice.

"Not that way," said the Inspector, irritably. "Don't be such a snob. Common to both; the same, I mean."

"Oh, I see, sir."

"Now. Hilary first. What have we got? The doctors found all the plums, the pillow reversed, the talc, and so forth. We got damn little besides. Fingerprints—hospital staff only. He hadn't been allowed any visitors and we didn't find traces of any."

"Not even of Miss Morley, who was found in his room?"

"Not even her. She was wearing gloves; she didn't take them off all the time she was there."

"She could have turned the pillow."

"She could. She's probably quite strong, physically; they often are. If she didn't lose her head, she could have lifted the body up enough to get her shoulder against it while she turned the pillow over. I've marked up that possibility as the sort of crazy thing she might do, to make the dead man more comfortable, or straighten him up, or something."

"But you don't think she might have pressed the pillow over his face, first?"

"No. Nurse Carr found him dead before Miss Morley went into the room at all."

"So she did. Wash that out, sir."

"I suppose she might have slipped in earlier, but I doubt it. Sister Wright was keeping a pretty close eye on her; Mr Goddard had given very strict orders about visitors. On the other hand, I'm almost sure she put that newspaper in his room, and then sneaked Sister's copy, which she left behind her in the waiting room later."

"If she did it was pretty slick work. Would she be capable of that?"

"Of a certain amount of cunning, I'm prepared to acknowledge. But I don't know why she did it. Unless she thought it was appropriate to leave the notice of his death there in his room, as it was now true."

"Or unless she wanted to suggest he'd had a heart attack, knowing perfectly well he had not. Or unless—"

"Well, what?"

"Unless she wanted him to have a heart attack when he saw the notice."

"But he was dead already."

"Yes, of course."

Sergeant Forrest gave up speculating. He had only done it because he thought his superior was inclined to fit Joyce Morley into the evidence, rather than the other way round, and he was trying to help. But his efforts were clearly not successful.

After a pause he said, "So it all boils down at the hospital to this Nurse Barker?"

"Exactly. Heaven alone knows if he had any connection with the Strongitharms. I can't find any. But he chooses to make a mystery of his whereabouts that morning. The barber says he saw him going up the corridor as he himself left Strongitharm's room. Sister swears she saw him going into the room. At the times they give, which fit one another reasonably well, Barker denies being in the ward at all. But it has been shown that he was not at that time in any of the other places where he had work to do. He will not supply information about what he was doing during this gap in his morning."

"Is it a big gap? Couldn't it be accounted for by incorrect timing, faults of

memory, that sort of thing?"

"About half an hour? A bit too long, especially as the barber and Sister agree, quite independently."

"Is there anything to connect Barker with the Strongitharms?"

"I told you. Not a thing. He never saw Hilary in his life until he was detailed for special duty to nurse him. So he says, and I can find no reason to disbelieve him."

"Then why doesn't he say where he was? If he had nothing to do with the murder, why be so cagey? He sees the importance to himself of coming across, doesn't he?"

"No. I don't think he does, yet. He's an obstinate type: just the kind that would hold out on purpose. He must have been in the hospital, I think. The pubs weren't open. He wasn't using a telephone, outside or in. He wasn't laying any bets."

"You know all that, sir, do you?"

Inspector Stewart smiled.

"I do."

"A girl?"

"The next likely, I suppose. Funny time of day. But he might have been conveying a message or making a date or something. I'm working on that now. Any nurse or any member of the secretarial or administrative staff not in her place at the given time. It's a long job, and we haven't got through yet. But the heads of the various departments are being very co-operative, and doing their best not to give the show away. Still, time's getting on. It's the best part of a week now since it happened. The Chief Constable is getting worried. People's memories are growing dim for what happened nearly a week ago, he says. I don't need reminding. If we don't get a move on, he'll go calling in the Yard."

"We don't want that, sir, do we?" Forrest saw an angry gleam in his chief's eye, and hurried on. "So much for the hospital case," he said. His own work had been done at Marsden, and he thought it was time to review it.

"Not quite," said the Inspector, moodily. "There is the question of the aspirin pills."

"Aspirin?"

Stewart explained about anti-coagulants and the attendant dangers in their administration.

"The hospital pharmacist is convinced the pills he was taking were given him with the deliberate intention of doing harm, if not of actually causing his death. His very serious illness may, in fact, have been caused by those pills."

"I see." Sergeant Forrest considered. "In that case, haven't we got the deaths in the right order, after all? And the possibility of keeping it down to

the brothers? Hugh poisoning Hilary, or thinking he had, and then committing suicide?"

"Damn," said Inspector Stewart. He sat back in his chair, and moved his hand in an impatient gesture.

"Hugh, then," he said. "Suicide or murder. What have you got on that?"

Sergeant Forrest turned his head to look out of the window.

"Plum says the nest was phoney, sir."

The Inspector struck the table with the flat of his hand.

"Of course it was phoney! A ramshackle affair of sticks and loose bits of old straw. It could no more block up a chimney than— than a—"

"Piece of knitting," suggested Forrest.

"Far less effectively than some knitting I've seen."

"But I didn't mean phoney in the matter of blocking," Forrest persisted. "It was the nest itself, and the state it was in when Plum found it."

"How d'you mean?"

"Plum says it was a magpie's nest, sir. He's in a position to know, being brought up in the country, and dead keen on bird-nesting when he was a nipper. Magpies don't nest in chimneys, ever; he was most emphatic on that. Not that any bird would be likely to nest in a chimney that was in constant use. And then again, from the way the twigs were bent and that, it was plain to Plum and me, too, when he showed it me, that the nest had never been built in the chimney. It had been pushed down it. The chimney was a bit small for it, really."

"I know. I know." The Inspector had gone over the report on the nest several times. He had also studied its appearance, not convinced that its present dilapidation was due entirely to the clumsy handling of whoever had put it in the chimney. Some of the credit for that must go to the enterprising Plum, who had pulled it out, the interfering so-and-so.

"Something blocked the chimney and blocked it efficiently," he said. "I don't see how the suicide idea holds at all. Who would block the chimney until the carbon monoxide in the greenhouse reached lethal proportions, and then take out the block, introduce the nest, go back into the greenhouse and wait for death, wondering if there'd still be enough gas to bring it off? Fantastic!"

"Put like that, sir, it doesn't sound very probable," Forrest conceded.

"It sounds damned impossible," said the Inspector. "If, on the other hand, it was blocked on purpose and effectively by a maliciously minded person, why on earth did that person take out the original block, whatever it was, and substitute that altogether phoney nest?"

"It was a real magpie's nest," corrected Forrest.

"You know perfectly well what I mean," Stewart said, angrily.

There was a little pause.

"The incinerator—" began Sergeant Forrest, cautiously.

"Yes. The half-burned rubbish you got out of it late that evening. Pity Constable Plum didn't think of looking in there at once, instead of bird-nesting in the chimney."

Forrest said nothing. He judged it would not be wise to go on defending Constable Plum at present.

"The analysis of the rubbish showed up nothing that could not have come out of the house or garden, and several things like torn up letters, bills, and a few old rags, that certainly did come from the house."

"Including that piece of the maid's dress. Mabel's. The one that looks after —"

"Miss Mabel Thorne," said the Inspector. "Her fingerprints were on the door handle of the greenhouse, over those of Miss Morley and the brothers."

"They would be, since she was the one who found Mr Strongitharm, on information given earlier by Miss Morley, who had seen him inside."

"And didn't say a word about the state he was in. That's why Mabel Thorne didn't go out at once to look for him. Only when it had passed his usual time for coming in."

"It could be the reason."

"Have you got any other?"

"Only this question of the money, sir. Mrs Strongitharm gets everything now, doesn't she?"

"Yes. We've been over this already."

"It's just possible," said Forrest, apologetically, "that Mabel might think it was in her own interest—I mean, it might have been pointed out to her—She's very devoted, and all that."

Inspector Stewart looked keenly at his assistant.

"Are you suggesting Mrs *Strongitharm* put her up to it?"

As Forrest made no answer, the Inspector concluded that he was.

"On the strength of finding household rubbish and a bit of Miss Thorne's old dress in the incinerator? Too far-fetched, by a long chalk. Anyone who had access to the house could have got that bundle together. What about the two daily women? Or Wilson, the gardener?"

"Or the mental daughter, Miss Morley? She's certainly got a knack of always being there when anything happens, hasn't she?"

Inspector Stewart shook his head.

"She might have done the nest stunt," he said. "But I think a real cold-blooded plan like this seems to have been, would be beyond her."

"I don't know," said Forrest, obstinately. "I can think of several cold-

blooded murders done by mental deficients."

"Don't you mean moral deficients? It needn't be the same thing. Usually isn't."

"But it is sometimes, isn't it? Anyway, I think the old lady might have put her up to it. She'd take suggestion easily, wouldn't she?"

"Still harping on Mrs Strongitharm as the villain of the piece?"

"Old ladies get queer, don't they? If there's something the matter with them, specially. Her blindness. She might want a sort of—sort of revenge—"

Sergeant Forrest's voice faded. He was out of his depth. Inspector Stewart, too, felt he might sink in the swamps of modern psychopathology if he pursued the subject. So he let it drop.

"As for those notices in the Death columns of the newspapers/' he said, briskly turning to a new and more rewarding topic. "We've got that nearly sorted out. The *Times* and the *Telegraph* both reported payment by postal order. The orders turn out to have been issued by Farthing-on-Hone Post Office for one lot, and Little Farthing for the other. Both the same morning; the day after Hugh's death."

"Do they remember at the Post Offices who they issued them to?"

"At Farthing the postmistress says she's sure it was a little girl, but she doesn't remember who. She's new to the district. Doesn't know many people yet. At the other place it's a Mrs Roach, who keeps a general shop. She has a vague idea the money orders were for Mr Willis, who owns the farm up on the hill behind Little Farthing."

"What would Mr Willis want to put such a notice in for?"

"He wouldn't. And he wasn't in the shop at all that day. But he did send one of his boys, one of the farm boys, down to the shop. His wife wasn't well that morning. He sent this boy down with a list of groceries to be sent up to the farm."

"Did the boy get the postal orders?"

"He denies it—so far."

"Do you think it was him, sir?"

"He may have been asked to get them by someone who paid him for doing it, and told him to hold his tongue."

"No one else in the shop when he was there?"

"I've not traced anyone so far."

"What about the little girl at Farthing, sir?"

The Inspector sighed wearily.

"There are about fifty little girls at Farthing. Each one about as dim as the next."

Constable Forrest hesitated.

"May I make a suggestion, sir?"

"Naturally. Go ahead."

"Constable Plum is very well thought of in Farthing. And he has a couple of little girls, himself. Would it be possible to leave that investigation to Plum, sir?"

Inspector Stewart frowned, sighed, and finally produced a rather wry smile.

"I don't see that he could do any harm," he said, ungraciously. "I'd like you to stick to the Marsden House angle. Have another go at the dailies. They might have noticed someone unexpected in the grounds the day Hugh was gassed. There was a good deal of coming and going that morning over Hilary's illness. They would be roused and alert for fresh excitements, you'd think. And have another close look in the outlying parts of the grounds, those fields down by the river. Any trace of anyone coming into the kitchen garden from there. That sort of thing."

"After a week, sir?"

"It's a long shot, but you never know in this game, do you? If you find anything, let me know at once. I've got my hands full at present with Barker's alibi or absence of same. Young idiot! I've a good mind to pull him in for obstruction. But I hope to get it cleared up tomorrow, at the latest."

"If Barker is cleared, sir, what then?"

"Then Sister Wright is a fool or a liar, and didn't see Barker at all. Or else, which might be interesting, and is more probable, she saw someone she thought was Barker, but was not, in fact, Barker, going into Strongitharm's room. The same remarks apply to the barber. Now, they are both prepared to swear it was Barker they saw, and they both know Barker, and ought to be able to recognise him. But the point will arise, when Barker chooses to clear himself, that in actual fact neither Sister nor the barber actually met Nurse Barker face to face, or spoke to him. A lot of people have dark hair like Barker's. And a gauze mask, the kind they wear, covers more than half the face. I'm not saying yet it wasn't him, but it *could* have been someone else."

"What sort of someone else?"

"Someone in a borrowed hospital gown and mask. The murderer."

Chapter Eight

Constable Plum was suffering from a divided mind, and definitely torn feelings. His position at Farthing had undergone a most unpleasant change, which he could only attribute to the orders he had been given by Inspector Stewart. From the time he had begun to make his own inquiries in the village about the unknown buyer of the money orders, he found himself alone, isolated, practically sent to Coventry. As if he had been a blackleg in a factory, he told his wife, in an aggrieved voice.

"And all because Miss Simpson can't use her pair of eyes, or her intelligence, such as it is."

"Or doesn't care to," said his wife, acidly. "Doesn't want to mix herself up in a police case, I don't mind betting. She's new here, and she doesn't make friends easily. Everyone says that. Keeps herself very much to herself. She may be shy."

"Shy, my foot," said Constable Plum. "She's no call to be shy when it's an official inquiry. She ought to know her duty better. She's a public servant, isn't she?"

"That doesn't oblige her to remember every child that buys a stamp at her counter."

"It wasn't a stamp. It was a postal order, with the instructions for it printed on a bit of paper that was folded round the money. She remembers all that, but she doesn't remember which of the kids it was."

"She remembers it was a little girl. And that the printed message was roughly done. 'Illiterate' writing, she called it to Mrs. Brown."

"Oh, yes," Constable Plum agreed, with heavy sarcasm. "She remembers most everything, except who that child was. It's my belief she remembers just what she chooses to, no more and no less."

Mrs Plum looked scornful.

"I should have thought you could do without her evidence," she said. "Wasn't there anyone else in the shop that morning? Didn't anyone notice a child at the Post Office counter?"

"Too many," answered her husband, gloomily. "And they all noticed other people's children, not their own. And when I go to ask, the parents deny it. I've had more downright rudeness these two days," said Constable Plum, indignantly, "than when they burned the Guy Fawkes on the War Memorial steps, and blackened the list of names. Children again, you see. And not a

parent prepared to side with the law against the young devils."

"You can't altogether blame them," said Mrs Plum. "I'd do the same myself."

"Not if I knew it," Plum told her.

His wife looked at him, pityingly.

"Why go on with it, if it only makes you unpopular?" she asked.

"Because they think I'm well liked here," said Plum, with a hollow laugh. "They think I'll find it dead easy. I know everyone. I'm in their confidence. I've only got to go up to every mother in the place and say, 'Excuse me, but did your little Annie, or Gracie, or whatever, buy a postal order for a murderer?' And they'll say, 'Oh, Mr Plum, that was what it was for, was it?' "

"Don't be daft!" said Mrs Plum. "So that *is* what it's all about, is it? You might have told me."

"I oughtn't to have told you, now," Constable Plum hastened to tell her. "Keep it to yourself, won't you?"

Mrs Plum looked at him again, affectionately this time.

"You think this is your big chance, don't you? If you do what they want you'll get promotion?"

"Well, I don't know. You have to try to do what they want."

Mrs Plum went over to him and drew his arm round her waist.

"I don't want you any different, Tom," she said, gently. "We've got along pretty well so far, without ambition, and I reckon we'll make out best our own way. I'm happy here, and so are the kids. We could do a lot worse than stick to Farthing."

Constable Plum kissed his wife and moved away from her.

"All the same," he said, "ambition or no ambition, I want to get to the bottom if it. First bit of excitement we've had in Farthing since we came here. I don't want to be out of it."

Mrs Plum was thinking.

"That message with the money," she said. "The writing was illiterate, was it? Was that what Miss Simpson called it?"

"Yes."

"Have you thought who it could be that wrote it?"

"Of course I have. There's only one it could be that makes sense."

"Who's that?"

"Look. I can't tell you the ins and outs of this case. You mustn't ask me."

"All right. I won't ask you. I'll tell you. Miss Morley. You know as well as I do they all think she's been up to some devilment. She was over here the morning the money orders was bought. I've been told that by several who saw her shopping. Find out about her, and you'll most likely get what you want to

know."

"Are you trying to teach me my business?"

"Oh, well, if you've thought of it already."

Constable Plum had thought of it often, and had been asking leading questions, both officially and off the record. It was not his fault that the butcher had been away for a few days with his wife, visiting her parents in Wiltshire. Plum spoke to him the day after his return.

"The Tuesday," said the butcher, removing his hand from the side of beef he was starting to cut up, and running it through his hair. "Let me see. Morning customers? I'd better just have a squint at the order books. It's always the same faces, so I don't remember exactly who came in that morning."

He searched for a few minutes, then looked up, his finger held on the page of his book.

"Marsden House," he said.

"That's the stuff!" said Plum, incautiously.

"Miss Thorne rang up an order early. I remember that. I'd barely got the shop open. And then blow me down if that poor creature—"

"Miss Morley?"

"That's right. She came in saying she wanted to give an order. I told her it had already come through, and she looked quite taken aback. She bought a few pennorth of scraps for the dog, she said."

"They don't keep a dog."

"Is that so?" The butcher waited politely for more, but as it was not forthcoming, he went on, reflectively, "She did seem more than usual queer that morning. Before she came into my shop she was having a long palaver with the children out on the green. I expect your Joycie told you, though."

"*My Joycie*!"

Constable Plum turned a deep brick-red. The butcher laughed.

"Didn't say a word, didn't she? I'm not surprised. Playing truant from school, I suppose? I'd have thought the teacher would have mentioned it to you or Mrs Plum. There was several did notice her there, and remarked on it."

"But—but—" Constable Plum pulled himself together. "She'd only just finished her chicken-pox. Out of quarantine the day before. Due back in school the Wednesday."

"Oh, so that was it, was it?" The butcher's eyes twinkled with suppressed amusement. Some thought Joycie had been playing truant, and some thought she might be giving the chicken-pox to their own kids. Either way they had it in for the Plum parents. He grinned.

"You ask Joycie," he said. "She'll tell you what Miss Morley was up to

with the kids that morning."

"She'd better," said Constable Plum. He went home to tell his wife the cause of his present difficulties.

The cause herself, coming home at dinner time, found her reception both cold and hostile. She was told she was late, and ordered to sit down and get on with it. She was so surprised that she did as she was bid, and having finished the meal first of the three children, got up to go.

"Who said you could leave the table?" asked Constable Plum, firmly.

"Sit down, Joycie," said her mother. "Dad wants to speak to you. You others can go," she added, to the younger ones. With a quick shuffle and some suppressed giggles, they ran off. Joycie hovered, swinging on the back of her chair.

"Why didn't you tell me you were talking to Miss Morley that day you were out of quarantine?" barked Constable Plum.

Joycie looked down and answered carefully, "Because you didn't ask me."

"You know I've been round trying to find out what she was doing in Farthing that morning. Don't pretend you don't know. The other children will have told you."

Joycie was silent. Then, with a sudden movement she made for the door. But her father, though bulky, was agile. Before she was out of the room a large hand seized her by the skirt of her dress and hauled her back.

"Now just you look here," he said, standing her between his knees and giving her a slight shake from time to time. "This is a serious matter. You're witholding information, and you might get sent to prison for that."

"Oh, Dad," said Mrs Plum. "If you scare her you won't get nothing out of her."

"I'll get this out of her," said Plum, "if I have to belt it out."

This unusually savage speech from a hitherto indulgent parent had its effect. Joycie grew pale, and was clearly shaken. Mrs. Plum gulped and was silent.

"Now then," repeated Plum. "Did you, or did you not, talk to Miss Morley that Tuesday morning?"

"She started it. She came over to where we were playing and gave us some butterscotch."

"So I've been told. What then?"

"She—she went—away."

"Did she, or did she not, ask you to get her a postal order at the Post Office?"

"No. She never."

"That's a lie!"

Mrs Plum protested.

"Joycie doesn't tell lies. You know she doesn't."

"She's telling one now. Why do you think I've had all these black looks, and everyone refusing to help me? Because they all know, their kids have told them, it was my own child went in the Post Office."

"They couldn't have," said Joycie, fiercely.

"Why not?"

"They prom—"

"They promised not to split, did they? Now look here," said her father, drawing her close, and putting his large face near to hers. "Miss Simpson says it was a little girl, about eight, with fair hair, just like you, see? Only she doesn't know the names round here yet. That was who she gave the order to."

"She's a liar!" said Joycie, passionately.

"Why?"

"Because there was two orders. It was two red ones."

Constable Plum drew a deep breath.

"It was, was it? And how, may I ask, do you happen to know it was two, if you didn't get them yourself?"

Joycie broke into loud sobs. Constable Plum released her, and she made for the door again.

"Where are you off to, now?"

"Let her go, Dad. She's upset, naturally."

"Where are you off to?"

"School," said Joycie, in a choked voice. "I'll be late. I hate you! I hate you!"

"None of that!" said her mother. "Your own father! I'm ashamed of you."

"Go and get your bicycle," ordered Plum.

"It's outside. That's what I'm doing."

"Go and wash your face, then. You're coming with me."

Joycie stopped crying and stared. She had never before heard this tone of voice applied to herself. It frightened her, but at the same time gave her a curious sense of satisfaction. She had always been proud of her father's position in Farthing. Just now she admired him very much indeed.

"Get on!" said Constable Plum, roughly. "We haven't got all day."

"Where are you taking her?" asked Mrs Plum, when the child had left the room.

"Hanningford. She'll have to tell her story to Inspector Stewart. That'll teach her to hold out on her own father, not to mention the law. And tell lies

into the bargain."

"She's only eight. They don't know the difference between lies and truth at that age."

"That's what you've read in all these trashy magazines. 'Our psychologist says—' I know the stuff. Don't they know the difference? You saw her just now. Guilty as hell. She's been spoilt. That's what's the matter with her. Bad example to the other two. Well, we'll do a bit of unspoiling for a change, and see how she takes it."

She took it very well. And somewhat to Constable Plum's chagrin, she left Hanningford Police Station with compliments on the way she had given her evidence, and licking at an out-size ice-cream cornet, hurriedly fetched by a junior constable from the nearest confectioner.

In the late afternoon of the day Constable Plum was making these inquiries, Detective-Sergeant Forrest was at Marsden House, or rather in the grounds outside it. He did not know what he was looking for, and this, very rightly, made him both irritable and depressed. He had already made up his mind who had meddled with the flue of the hothouse. Miss Morley. She was the only member of the household who had been at large in the kitchen garden after tea on the day Hugh Strongitharm had died. Wilson had gone home, his grandson did not take away the goats that day until after the body was found. The women in the house provided one another's alibis. Besides, Miss Morley's fingerprints had been found, not only on the hothouse door, where they were expected, but also on Wilson's short ladder in the tool shed, on the tool shed door, and also, more significant still, on the lid of the incinerator.

The snag was the woman's state of mind. Sergeant Forrest's one attempt at questioning her had been a failure. She had simply stared at him, repeated many times that she had seen her step-brother in the hothouse pottering among the plants, and when pressed for more information, began to cry. Her keeper, or whatever she was, Miss Thorne, who insisted upon being present at the interview, had warned him against going on with his questions. He might make her very ill, Miss Thorne had said.

So Sergeant Forrest found himself moving slowly past the old stables, feeling hopelessly baffled. He struggled with himself to get his thoughts in order, but it did not seem to lead anywhere.

Suppose Miss Morley was the agent in Hugh Strongitharm's death? Was she acting as a tool, an uncomprehending agent? And if so, whose? If not, was she not only agent, but principal? Not acting for someone else, but for herself? Irresponsibly, following a queer mood due to her mental condition? Deliberately, maliciously, abnormally, in a primitive, wicked desire to kill?

Remembering Miss Morley's plain, dull, but not unamiable face, Sergeant Forrest could not fit her into the part of irresponsible devil, killing for the hell

of it. No, much more likely the poor soul had been used. Then by whom, and for what ultimate purpose?

So there he was, back with the old problem of motive. And no one in the Strongitharm family or household seemed to have any motive that would prompt so drastic a step as a double murder.

Sergeant Forrest stood still at the gate that led out of the stable yard, staring back at the decaying coach house and the cobble-stones. There had been a shower of rain while he was in the house, asking his questions, but the sun was out again now, and it shone on the smooth wet stones and on the emerald grass tufts between them. He reflected idly that there had been a similar slight shower the evening he had been called over to Marsden House by Dr Matthews to see the place where Strongitharm had been gassed. A pity old Matthews had called the ambulance first, or rather, a pity the chap was still just alive when the doctor got to him. The St John's men thought he was finished, but they had to rush him off on the doctor's orders, performing artificial respiration and all the rest of it. Anyway, he was dead when they got to Hanningford.

Forrest's photographic memory recalled the scene at his arrival. The yard had been wet then, as it was today. But because the ambulance had been in the yard there had been a large dry patch near the middle where it had stood, and a smaller one at the side where the doctor's—

Sergeant Forrest left the gate and moved in towards the coach house. The patch where the doctor's car had been was near this building, quite near it; tucked away beside it, in fact, thought the sergeant, looking round and noting that both Marsden House itself and the road beyond the gate were out of sight from this position.

He cursed himself suddenly, for a new and revealing memory had come back to him. When he had gone over the hothouse with Dr Matthews on that fatal evening, he had gone into the house with the doctor to telephone Hanningford and Tukesbridge. After this Dr Matthews had left and he had seen him to his car—in *the front drive.*

So perhaps it had not been Dr Matthew's car in the stable yard. Of course the doctor could have taken his car first to the yard, and then moved it, but this was unlikely. He would surely go to the front door first, and after that there would be no point in moving the car; it would be quicker to go out to the hothouse on foot. In any case, if he had gone first to the yard, he would have left the car there. Suppose then the dry patch he had seen was not left by Dr Matthews's car? Then whose was it? And why was it there? Had it been there at the same time as the ambulance, or before, or after? The rain had fallen just before he himself had started out from Hanningford. It was over before he got clear of the town. The car must have been there before the rain, and the ambulance too, so they must have been there together. And yet he had not been told of anyone else appearing on the scene.

He cursed himself again. Just the sort of thing he would slip up on. What was the good of having a photographic memory if it refused to work at the right time? He ought to have asked about that other car, whose it was, what it was doing in the yard. He ought to have measured the dry patch it had left. He ought to have got on to the St John's men at once. Now it was a bit late in the day; memories fade quickly, as Inspector Stewart had said. He had something new to tell the Inspector, he reflected, but he was not cheered by this.

He left the stable yard by the gate and walked back along the road to the other gates that led into the front drive, where he had left his own car.

As he went in he heard rustlings and the clanking of chains in the shrubbery just inside the gates; also a boy's voice, low and sullen, and the voice of Miss Morley, loud and angry.

"You're to do as I tell you, Trevor. It wasn't yours, it wasn't! Everything in this garden belongs to me, especially now. I can do what I like with it."

"It was mine, and you took it. I'll tell them so."

"If you tell them anything, I'll—I'll kill you!"

The bushes parted suddenly, and a slim boy in a dirty shirt, and trousers too big for him, came through, leading two white goats that kept reaching down trying to nibble the grass as he pulled them along. After the boy came Miss Morley, her hair more untidy than ever, her cardigan unbuttoned, and her cotton dress stained where she had brushed against the wet bushes.

When the boy saw Sergeant Forrest he gave the goats' chains a sharp tug and hurried them through the gate and away up the road. Miss Morley, on the other hand, stood her ground, staring with dull hostile eyes at the man who had upset her so recently.

"Good evening," said the sergeant, politely.

Miss Morley's mouth twisted to one side, and her lips trembled, but she did not speak. Forrest went on up the drive, got into his car, and drove back very slowly towards the gates. He did not see Miss Morley, but a movement in the bushes as he passed told him she was still there, watching him.

Chapter Nine

Fiona Goddard had not lost her interest in the Strongitharm case, and when an opportunity came her way of actually visiting the house and its owner, she seized it readily. This occasion was provided by the Farthing Women's Institute.

Fiona had often mentioned to her new friends how interested she was in the theatre, and particularly in amateur acting. Very soon after her arrival in the district she had been invited to join the Hone Valley Players, and six weeks later, the secretary of the organisation having moved out of the neighbourhood, she found herself appointed to this honorary post.

The Players consisted of about twenty women and six men who were genuinely keen on acting, and four of whom had real talent, and a further thirty members who, if pressed, would take small parts, but on the whole preferred to act as auxiliaries. Among these were to be found the usual quota of young men who wished to design or build sets, and the larger number very ready to employ their extensive knowledge of electricity on such things as lighting, effects, and gadgets in general.

Fiona's job, when she came to it, consisted merely in collecting a small yearly subscription from the members, in sending them notices of an annual general meeting, and in supplying the local Press with information about the productions. As there were only two of these, one in the autumn and one in the spring, her task was not an arduous one. Especially as the spring production was over by the time she was appointed, and the subscriptions did not fall due for another six months.

The annual general meeting, however, did come into her term of office. The Hone Valley Players attended this in reasonable numbers, but they were unusually depressed. Their funds were low, the spring production had been generally thought to be too highbrow; there was a worse than usual adverse balance in their account. Fiona, in her enthusiasm and wish for action, made a suggestion. Instead of the customary bazaar and garden party in aid of, why shouldn't she canvass the local big-wigs for subscriptions? Any money she raised would be pure gain, and if she was snubbed she really couldn't care less. After some hesitation her plan was adopted. Garden party bazaars meant a great deal of organising and expense, and made little profit in relation to the work done. Fiona's plan let the others out. As she said, cheerfully, if it was a complete flop they could hold a bazaar after all.

So, a few days later, in the early afternoon of the day after Sergeant

Forrest's latest visit to Marsden House, Fiona arrived at the main gates in her own small car.

She drove in very slowly, being uncertain of the length of the drive or the position of the house, for the drive curved away to the right and the building was hidden. As she went in she noticed someone standing among the bushes, and when she had stopped the car near the house and got out, she looked back. A woman was walking towards her up the drive. From all she had heard she concluded that this was Miss Morley. So she waited beside her car for the other to come up to her.

"Good afternoon," she said, politely.

"Who are you?" asked Miss Morley, adding, before Fiona could speak, "I'm Joyce Morley."

"Good afternoon, Miss Morley. I am Fiona Goddard."

There was a little pause. Fiona was uncertain how to go on. Miss Morley had begun to breathe heavily, and was looking at her with a strange intensity. The obvious thing was to ask her if her mother was at home. Or simply to turn away and go up to the front door.

Before Fiona had decided which course to take, Miss Morley said, Mrs Goddard?"

Fiona said, "Yes. I think you have met my husband. At Hanningford Hospital. He is one of the surgeons there."

She wondered if this would upset Miss Morley. But it was better to get it over at once. She went on, "I really came to see your mother. Will she be in, do you think?"

"She's always in," said Joyce, sullenly, "except when Mabel takes her on to the terrace."

"I had better ring the bell, perhaps, and ask."

"No," said Joyce, suddenly, holding out a hand. "I'll show you the garden. Mother's resting. You can talk to me first and then I'll find Mabel and she'll take you to her."

This sounded perfectly reasonable, so Fiona walked away with Miss Morley, round the corner of the house and past the terrace, unoccupied, she noticed, and down on to the lawn, and on into the rose garden, sheltered by tall yew hedges.

"We can sit down here," said Joyce, leading the way to a garden seat. "They can't see us from the house."

Fiona was not sure if this was a good thing, but she realised that she was being given a unique and quite unexpected chance of getting to know Miss Morley. So far she was not at all what she had been led to expect. She looked quite normal; plain and dull, but in no way grotesque. Her mental deficiency could not be of a serious order, she decided.

Miss Morley, sitting beside Fiona on the garden seat, was feeling singularly at ease. Mrs Goddard was not at all like her husband; not in the least brusque or penetrating, as he had been, and therefore to be feared. On the contrary, Mrs Goddard was gentle and pleasant, and did not seem to mind being asked questions. All her life people had avoided answering Joyce's questions. But Mrs Goddard answered them.

Fiona did so because she was learning so much about Miss Morley. And by asking a few well-chosen and well-wrapped-up questions herself, she discovered even more. She began to understand the strange unreal world Miss Morley lived in, a world not so much distorted as withdrawn. Fiona was close enough to her own children's minds to understand where Miss Morley's progress had halted. It was a shock to her, therefore, when the other said, with a sidelong smile of great intentional significance, "I have one great friend."

She had been complaining of her lack of companionship, and Fiona had been seeing her as the perpetual only child, compelled to play alone for ever. This remark of Miss Morley's, adult in the way it was spoken, destroyed at one blow her former sentimental conclusions.

"What do you mean?" she said, quite sharply.

Joyce looked offended.

"Don't talk like all the others. I thought you were different. Kind. You look kind-and pretty."

"I'm sorry. I was startled. I don't know what you mean."

"Don't you?" said Joyce. "I thought you might, as you're married." She looked away, and continued dreamily, "I love him. More than anyone. More than God."

Fiona found this very embarrassing. She decided that she must not listen any more. Poor Miss Morley's fantasies were now leading to an avowal that might implicate someone she knew. Better not listen to any further indiscretion. She tried to change the subject.

"It is half-past three," she said, looking at her watch. "Do you think your mother—?"

Miss Morley took this quite calmly. She was smiling and happy, enjoying the delicious pleasure of telling her secret to someone beside herself.

"I'll take you in," she said. "We'll find Mabel."

And then, as they walked back across the lawn towards the house, she slipped a hand through Fiona's arm, pressed close against her, and whispered ecstatically, "We're engaged, really. But don't tell Mother. She mustn't know it yet."

Fiona was speechless, and against her will, against her true feeling of compassion, repelled. She could accept Miss Morley, plain, thickset, middle-aged, as a child, an innocent child; but as an adolescent, and a knowing one at

that, no—it was too much, it was repulsive. With horror she found herself wondering, in spite of all reasonable judgment, if it were true that Miss Morley had an admirer. It would not be the first time such a poor creature had been deceived. She detached Joyce's clinging hand as gently as she could, and looking up, saw another figure on the terrace.

Mabel had been looking for Joyce in a desultory kind of way, ever since she had discovered she was not in her room at two o'clock, when she was supposed to be there, resting. The other maids had both said, "Down by the gate, as usual. What do you expect?" And Mabel had walked down the drive and back, seeing the bushes move as Joyce crept further in, hiding from her. She had left it at that, just then, because she had to attend to Mrs Strongitharm. But later, when the old lady had dozed off, comfortably settled for her after-luncheon nap, Mabel had gone down to the gate again and found that Joyce had vanished. But there was a strange car at the front door and no one had rung the bell. So Joyce had got hold of the visitor, whoever it was. Mabel went back into the house, deciding that this newcomer would soon make an excuse to get away. But as another half hour went by, and still no bell was rung in the house, she went on to the terrace, and saw her charge in the affectionate attitude in which she had just confided her great news to Mrs Goddard.

Fiona was relieved to see Mabel. She guessed at once who she must be.

"Miss Morley has very kindly been entertaining me," she said, quietly. "I understand Mrs Strongitharm is resting. Had I better call another time?"

Mabel was fully competent to deal with this situation. There was no change of expression on her face as she answered, "If you'll come indoors, madam, I will inquire."

Fiona was led round the house to the front door, which was standing open as Mabel had left it when she went out to look for Joyce. They all went in, and Mabel led the way to the drawing room. As Fiona went in Miss Morley dropped back.

"I'll go now," she said, loudly. "Before Mabel orders me about. I hope you'll stay to tea."

She turned and stumped away upstairs.

"What name shall I give, madam?"

"Oh! Yes. Tell Mrs Strongitharm Mrs Goddard would like to see her for a few minutes about something to do with the Women's Institute."

Fiona caught a gleam of recognition in Mabel's eyes when she gave her name. That was a pity. It would be relayed to Mrs Strongitharm that she was the surgeon's wife, and painful memories would be revived. She would not get her chance to make the old woman's acquaintance.

These gloomy thoughts were dispelled, however, a few minutes later, when Mabel came back to invite her to go upstairs.

"Mrs Strongitharm would like to see you, madam," she said. "She is up again now, but sitting in her room, if you wouldn't mind coming up."

"Of course," answered Fiona, readily, and once more followed the tall maid as she led the way to Mrs Strongitharm's bedroom. Mabel introduced her and then went away at once. Fiona moved forward. Mrs Strongitharm's face was turned in her direction and bore an expression of polite interest and welcome. Fiona wondered if she were really blind, she looked so alert.

"If you wouldn't mind coming to stand in the light," said Mrs Strongitharm, "I may be able to see you a little. I see light and shade and some colours. You are not very tall, are you?"

"Five foot, five," said Fiona.

"I thought much less. Perhaps I am not seeing your head. Have you very fair hair?"

"Reasonably," said Fiona, who found this conversation strange.

"I can see dark things better than light," went on Mrs Strongitharm. "You must forgive me. I used to take great pleasure in visual things, gardens, trees, landscapes, pictures of all kinds, faces—"

She broke off, sighing, then roused herself, and in a formal voice said, "You must think me very odd, Mrs Goddard. Please find yourself a chair. Your husband was our poor Hilary's surgeon, wasn't he? I should have written to him before now to thank him for all he did."

"Please don't think of it," murmured Fiona.

"But I do think of it. Continually. If only my step-son's heart— But we must not talk about that now."

So she hasn't been told the rumours, thought Fiona. Or has she? Has she been told that the whole district believes her daughter had some hand in both deaths? Or did she know it, already? Fiona suppressed these thoughts and quite simply stated the reason for her call. To her great relief, Mrs Strongitharm was sympathetic.

"Of course I should like to help," she said. "I am very glad you came to me. I only wish I could see the results of your work. I used to be very fond of the theatre myself when I was young. My husband—my first husband—and I were regular theatre-goers when we lived in London. Of course living in the country made it more difficult. Now, how can I help? What exactly would you like me to do?"

"Any contribution," said Fiona, lightly, "would help. If we can collect enough by private subscription to avoid the bazaar—"

"Yes, I understand. It swallows up most of its own profits, doesn't it? But I think you ought to keep the whist drive. That gets the village in, and makes

them a part of it. You don't want to turn into something handed out to them, from quite outside them, do you? There is much too much of that sort of thing already."

"Yes, indeed. But it wouldn't happen here. Some of the keenest of the acting members belong properly to the two Farthings."

"I'm very glad to hear it. Well, then, I shall give you something straight away."

"There's no hurry. A cheque—"

This was a blunder. Fiona saw the shadow sweep over Mrs Strongitharm's face, wiping out the lively interest that had been there before. Self-pity turned down the corners of the ancient mouth, and filled the sightless eyes with tears.

"I cannot write my own cheques," said Mrs Strongitharm, reproachfully. "I would prefer to give it you in cash. Perhaps you would ring for Mabel. Or *no*," she said, beginning to struggle up from her chair, "I will fetch my purse myself."

"Can I help you?"

"If you will just guide me to my wardrobe."

Fiona, surprised, but silent, led the old woman past a businesslike desk to the immense Victorian mahogany piece that occupied half one of the walls of the room. Mrs Strongitharm opened a section that contained shelves, where shoes and hats were housed. Fumbling behind the hats she drew out a handbag, took from it a wallet and from that three one-pound notes. She put the rest away again and closed the wardrobe door.

"You will think it queer of me to keep my handbag in there," she said. "But I cannot see what people are doing, and lately—" She broke off to feel whether the wardrobe door was properly shut. "It is wrong to put temptation in the way of maids and—others," she finished. Then she handed the notes to Fiona. "Will that do?" she asked, with a smile.

Considering that some of the houses she had visited had refused to make any contribution at all, and others had offered a ten shilling note, Fiona felt she should be overwhelmed, and she expressed suitable gratitude. Privately, however, she had hoped for a substantial cheque, ten pounds or so. The Strongitharms were supposed to be rolling in money, which they did not spend, except on the house and grounds. But perhaps that did take a good deal of it. The garden was beautifully kept.

She helped the old woman across the room to her chair, repeated her thanks and said she must go.

"You will not stay for a cup of tea with us?"

"Thank you so much, but I must get back. The children expect me."

"You have children? How many?"

"Three."

"I have only one child," said Mrs Strongitharm, with a quiet bitterness that shocked Fiona deeply.

"I have met Miss Morley," she said. "In the drive, when I got here. She was kind enough to show me your lovely rose garden."

Mrs Strongitharm stared in her direction.

"You were favoured," she said, drily. "Joyce usually avoids strangers."

"She was very friendly," said Fiona, continuing, rather to her own surprise, to defend Joyce. "She talked to me very naturally, and—and sensibly."

"She varies," said Mrs Strongitharm, sadly. "I'm glad you found her in such a good mood."

She paused, and Fiona waited, for the old woman seemed to have more to say.

"She was such a lovely baby," Mrs Strongitharm began again. "It was months before we suspected anything, and then only because she seemed to cry more than was natural for a child that was gaining weight and perfectly well. Even then we hoped for the best, though she was slow at walking and talking. It was not until she was five that we understood she would never really grow up to be a normal woman. We took her to all kinds of specialists, but they all said the same. It was a terrible blow to my husband. Perhaps if we had had more children, as all the doctors advised—But he was afraid. It wasn't understood in those days that it was not likely to happen again. I had German measles early in the pregnancy. Nobody knew then that it can give rise to mental deficiency in the baby."

"No," said Fiona. "That's a fairly new discovery. How terribly sad."

"I don't often speak of it," said Mrs Strongitharm. "But you belong to the medical world. And I feel you are linked with the family, in a way, through your husband and Hilary. Silly of me, I suppose, but I have had many shocks lately, and no one to confide in."

She fumbled for her handkerchief. Fiona began to feel very uncomfortable. She had not expected to find Mrs Strongitharm so emotional.

"You must forgive me," went on the old woman. "I am not usually like this. But I had a visit this morning from a police inspector. He brought the most terrible news. I mustn't discuss it with anyone, he said. It has upset me very much. Very much indeed."

Fiona thought quickly, then she does know, after all, and there is something in the rumours, too, those rumours about Joyce. When she spoke about Hilary's heart, she was just putting me off.

She got up to go. Her visit had been a success in more ways than one, but she felt she must not prolong it.

"I am so sorry," she murmured, taking Mrs Strongitharm's hand, and pressing it gently. "I really must go now. And thank you again, very very

much, for your generous present. We shall be sending out a list of subscribers later in the year. I wish everyone was as interested as you are, Mrs Strongitharm."

"Thank you for coming," said the old woman, holding Fiona's hand in a nervous clasp. "I hope you will come again to see me. I should like to talk to you some more about Joyce. So few people are sympathetic to her. You seem to be. Come again soon. Come again next week and have tea with us."

"I should like to," said Fiona. "Today week?"

"Yes. Today week."

As she reached the hall Fiona heard a noise on the stairs and turned to look back. Miss Morley was leaning over the banisters on the landing, smiling and waving to her. She waved back.

Chapter Ten

Diana Fawcett had been in Hanningford for seven months and she was horribly bored. She was bored with the comfortable stodgy provincialism of the town itself, its shops, its people. She was bored with the small number who had, grudgingly, accepted her into their circle of acquaintances. The fact that she knew they did not approve of her made her disdainful, rather than angry, but that did not lessen the boredom. She had made no friends, but she had not expected nor desired to make friends. She did not care for close relationships with women, and considered it was never possible to have platonic friendships with men. It had not taken her very long to develop a far from platonic relationship with Lionel Pusey. But she began to long for the time when she would leave Hanningford for good. She was beginning to be horribly bored by Lionel.

Not that she had spent the whole seven months in these surroundings without a break. She had been away for Christmas, and for several weekends, and once, in March, for a whole fortnight. These breaks, which were becoming more frequent as her affair with Lionel Pusey became more and yet more exacting, did refresh her spirits, but at the same time made her return increasingly tedious and hard to bear. She knew that in the end she would leave Hanningford: fade away from it, and leave behind first a stir, with a breath of scandal, and then a blank, easily filled and soon forgotten. It had happened many times in the past. She knew the routine. She had hoped she would never again find it necessary to apply herself to the well-worn technique, but circumstances had dictated otherwise. If things went as planned it would be well worth it. If not— If not, it was just too bad, but not for her, of course. She would finish exactly where she started, no better, no worse. In the meantime she forced herself to make the best of her position in Hanningford, and above all to make sure of Mr Pusey's continuing devotion.

This was not difficult. His ardour could be measured in direct inverse proportion to the diffidence that had kept him a bachelor until his present age of forty-one. It had needed Diana's brutally direct methods to pin down and hold the natural evasiveness of his timid ungenerous nature. The result had astonished him, while it delighted. He had lost his head and his judgment, and so far he did not care. He was prepared to do anything to keep Diana: he had done a good deal, and would have to do-a good deal more. If he could get her for himself in the end, get her as his wife, he would bear the cost, and sort out the hideous muddle afterwards. But he felt that he could not continue to live at

all without Diana.

She, on the other hand, was beginning to feel that Lionel Pusey had already become expendable. He had been a mistake, though a necessary one. How was she to know he would be like this? How was she to make the most of a trying situation?

She sat on her sofa one evening, considering these things and avoiding his eyes, which were fixed upon her with glowing devotion.

"How was he?" Lionel asked, tensely.

"Who?"

"Oh, for God's sakel Stop being so remote! I can't stand it!"

There was a desperation in his voice that warned her to be kind. She stretched out a hand to him with a lazy smile, and was nearly suffocated in the embrace that followed.

When she managed to extricate herself, she lay back against his shoulder, breathing hard and inwardly resentful.

"How was your husband?" Mr Pusey insisted. He had her in his arms, wholly submissive, he told himself. It was intoxicating; he rode the world, a conqueror. "Your poor invalid husband?" he added, putting a cowardly scorn into his voice.

"No better."

"But no worse?"

"I didn't think so."

"What about the divorce?"

She reached up to stroke his cheek.

"Didn't you talk to him about it?"

"How could I? When he is so ill?"

This was an answer he had heard many many times. He drew away from her, still sure of himself, still trying to dominate.

"Perhaps you don't really want to marry me? Had we better call the whole thing off?"

She looked at him carefully.

"Is that what you want? Shall I go away for good?"

He was at her feet again instantly, all the self-confidence blown away by that chill threat. Diana was quick to press her advantage.

"I'm not sure I shan't have to," she said, in a thoughtful voice. "People are beginning to talk. I suppose you know that?"

"I don't listen to what people say."

"I don't want to. But it isn't very nice when you hear your daily saying to the daily in the next flat, 'Of course he's keeping her. I shouldn't think she's

got much of her own.' "

Mr Pusey was appalled.

"You *actually* heard them say that? It was really meant for you?"

"I can't think who else. Specially as they shut up directly I came round the corner of the stairs. Giggling and nudging, you know the way they do, when they've been talking about you."

Lionel Pusey felt both disgusted and annoyed, because she had reproduced the voices of the dailies all too realistically. He had accepted the fact that she had been on the stage at one time; it had added something to her glamour. But he did not like her skill in reporting vulgarities; particularly when they touched him so nearly.

Diana was faintly amused.

"I believe you're shocked," she said, again stretching out a hand, in the gesture that never failed to bring him back to her. "Don't be shocked. After all, it's partly true, isn't it?"

He nodded. It embarrassed him to discuss money with her, however recklessly he was prepared to give it. He was often astonished at what he was doing for Diana, and horrified, too. But with a kind of exultation. He knew himself to be as careful, scrupulous and exact as any solicitor must be in his affairs. He knew he had no natural generous impulses towards others. So he was astonished, being unable to see further that his present outpourings to Diana were merely a glorious mad burst of self-indulgence. At least, he had not yet seen it that way. Nor the consequences of what it had entailed so far, and would bring to him in the days to come.

"You are terribly good to me, darling," said Diana, carefully, in the soft throaty voice she found so successful.

This time it did not have quite the expected result.

"I'm not sure we shan't have to go a bit steadier," Lionel said. He looked at her with his grave office expression, and added tritely, "I'm not made of money."

"Some of your clients are, though," said Diana. "Aren't they?"

Mr Pusey was shocked. This was cutting far too near the bone.

"Are you suggesting—?" he began, and stopped abruptly, afraid that his voice might betray him.

"Their fees," said Diana, smoothly. "Surely you must be making quite a little fortune over this—Strongitharm case?"

The name was there now, between them, and their false faces stared at one another across it.

Pusey turned away, walking to the window to look out, waiting for the evil confusion, that rose in a cloud about that name, to settle. He could not face her until then.

Diana said, in quite a different voice, “I suppose she does pay your bills? She’s a mean old bitch, stingy and mean, and damned suspicious.”

He wheeled round at that.

“What do you mean?”

“All this week she’s been fussing and fuming, and insinuating, about a few pound notes she’s missed out of her handbag.”

“What on earth are you talking about?”

“A few pound notes. I don’t know how much. Disappeared out of her wallet.”

“When?”

“I don’t know exactly. A day or two after all this trouble started. The point I’m making is that she suspects everyone. The dailies, her precious Mabel, the scatty Joyce, and even *me*!”

“How d’you know? She couldn’t accuse you of it.”

“Of course not. I’m still going there every morning. But there is a coldness, you’d hardly believe. The voice comes *straight* out of the frig. And I’ve noticed I don’t get left alone in a room now. I used to go off and write the answers to her letters in the library, leaving her in the drawing room if she was up and dressed, or in her room upstairs otherwise. Now she always receives me in the library, and receive is the right word. We’re very high and mighty these days. And there she sits, staring at me with her blind eyes while I work. It’s uncanny, I tell you. Because she isn’t looking, you see—she’s listening.”

“My God! The old horror!”

“You’ve said it. I rather think I shall pack up that job. The W.V.S. won’t mind. They can find me something else. I can’t really afford to run the car much longer.”

“*Surely*?”

“I know. You’ve been very sweet. But living is hellishly expensive in this town, and one must have clothes. A few new rags for the summer.”

Mr Pusey was alarmed. This was worse than he had expected. How much longer, he wondered—

Diana answered this thought.

“I told you. I’ll have to leave Hanningford and find somewhere cheaper.”

Or a wealthier protector, Lionel thought savagely, and a jealous pang shot through him, so acute it made him catch his breath.

“You can’t leave me!” he said, hoarsely, going back to her and taking her in his arms. “You are not to leave me. You are to get a divorce and marry me.”

She laughed softly.

"I'd be a very extravagant wife," she said. "Could you afford me?"

He knew he could not, but her mouth was close, touching his face and his lips with little cool kisses that stung his passion beyond endurance. There was more anger than love in his response; he let himself go in a savage frenzy that terrified her. When at last he released her she lay still, looking at him, all her pert mastery gone, her face sagging, showing her age in a way he had not noticed before.

"Well," she said at last, trying to rally herself, "quite the cave man, aren't you, darling?"

Even to her own ears this sounded cheap, but it was the best she could do at the moment.

"If you try to leave me," said Pusey, "I shall kill you."

That roused her shattered ego.

"I don't belong to you!" she cried, getting up and moving away from him. "I don't belong to anyone but myself. I never shall. And you'd better not talk like that. I might take you at your word. You've given a pretty good indication of what you're like inside. And it wasn't very pleasant, believe me."

Mr Pusey was trembling: he felt sick. He was just as astonished at himself, now, as Diana was. In a brief moment of illumination he realised the whole situation. He saw where he had been, what he had been, before she came; secure, respected, leading the even, if dull, life he had chosen, in the sunny, pleasant fold with the other Hanningford sheep. He saw where he now was, alone, lost in a dark savage desert, following a track that led not to safety but to ultimate destruction. Alone? No, he had her with him still. And, as the moment passed, his resolution hardened. Whatever it cost, there could be no turning back. Also he would see to it that she went with him to the end.

He forced himself to ask for more detail of the situation at Marsden House. It was vital to know as much as possible of what went on there.

"On the surface it's exactly the same as it always was," Diana told him. "But underneath, as I told you, it's very different."

"Apart from the missing money?"

"Well, naturally the old girl was upset by the coroner's verdict. It wouldn't be much cop to feel you'd got a murderer around somewhere, would it? Especially when you knew you couldn't see him, if he took it into his head to go for you, too."

The laugh that followed the callous words made Mr Pusey wince. For the second time that evening a chill distaste, mixed with fear, swept over him.

"Does she—surely she doesn't suspect—?"

"Anyone in the house? I'm not so sure. She does over those notes, so why not the other? There's always that horror, Joyce Morley. Everyone knows she stuck the notices in the newspapers."

"Do they?"

"Well, it's entirely obvious to me. And the dailies say the police have cottoned on to it now. They hear things, you know."

"It wouldn't be a crime—of any kind—if she had put in the obituaries."

"It isn't only that. It's obvious to me that it ties in with the missing money."

Lionel Pusey's heart gave a sickening jerk and raced on. Diana regarded his white face with interest and a certain misgiving.

"What's the matter? You didn't take the notes, yourself, did you?"

He managed to laugh, and to say, no, he had not taken them.

"Apparently Mrs Strongitharm keeps quite a big sum in the wallet in her handbag. All the housekeeping money for several weeks on end. Quite a chunk was missing a few days after the—deaths—when she wanted to hand some over for the housekeeping bills."

"I see." Mr Pusey drew a long breath. "And Mrs Strongitharm suspects everyone in the house, you said?"

"Quite." Diana's voice was casual, almost bored. "Don't you see, it must have been the daft one that pinched it to pay for the notices? Though perhaps it could have been the treasure."

"The who?"

"Mabel—the treasure, the pillar of strength, the standby. Personally, I should like to know if the wonderful Mabel stands to gain anything from the double demise. The old woman does, I take it? So indirectly, I suppose, Mabel may benefit in the long run."

"I can't tell you any of the provisions of the Strongitharm wills," said Pusey, stiffly.

"I didn't think you would, but you needn't talk as if you were in court, darling. I was only suggesting that Mabel might very well have aided and abetted the balmy one—"

"I know what you are suggesting," said Lionel, "and I hope you have not been talking to anyone else on those lines."

She flushed angrily, but did not answer him. Lionel Pusey began to feel miserable. The whole thing, Diana included, was slipping out of his control, and he knew that he had neither the strength nor the resourcefulness needed to drag it back. The idyll of his love for Diana, which had seemed, only two months before, to be the fulfillment of all his desires, now began to look like nothing more than a middle-aged infatuation, a sordid commonplace. He shuddered inwardly. If this were true, the price he had already paid was heavy, but the account was not yet closed. The final price, if he had to pay it in the end, meant utter ruin.

"Darling," said Diana softly, seeing and understanding.

She held out soft arms to him. She had by no means done with him yet.

It was once more the voice and look that had first ensnared him, and he was as vulnerable, he found, as ever. Holding her slim, skilful body close, he let himself drift back into his illusion, until its bright glow hid altogether the evil thoughts, and the dangerous conclusions.

Chapter Eleven

Fiona Goddard went to tea with Mrs Strongitharm as arranged; she was given a cordial welcome, both by the old lady herself, and by Joyce. This time Miss Morley was not stationed in the bushes by the gate, but was sitting on the stairs, halfway down the lowest flight, and looking eagerly towards the door. She got up as Fiona walked into the hall.

"I'll take Mrs Goddard to Mother, Jean," she said, loudly. "You needn't bother."

Jean gave Fiona a knowing look, and Joyce a very casual nod.

"O.K., Miss Morley," she said, in her most independent manner.

Joyce led her guest towards the drawing room door, saying in embarrassingly clear tones, "Servants don't know their place now-a-days, Mother says."

Mrs Strongitharm was looking better, Fiona thought. There was more colour in her pale skin, and her beautiful white hair, carefully arranged, gleamed frostily in the afternoon sun.

Mabel brought tea, performing her usual duties. Afterwards Mrs Strongitharm said, "You may go now, Mabel, and take Joyce with you."

"No," said Miss Morley, "I want to stay and talk to Mrs Goddard."

Her face had grown red, and tears were gathering in her small eyes.

"Afterwards," murmured Fiona, terrified of a scene. "Later on. I should like you to show me some more of the garden. I've only seen the roses, so far. Do you remember taking me to see them?"

"Of course I do," said Joyce. "I remember everything."

She was still defiant, but evidently wished to please the visitor.

"I'll come and find you a bit later on," Fiona repeated. "Will that do? Then we can have a talk."

"Yes," said Miss Morley. "I should like to talk to you. Most people don't listen to what I say, but you do. You're different. I like you."

She smiled; her wide, pathetic, repellent smile of good-will and affection. Fiona smiled back, and Joyce followed Mabel out of the room.

"You are very kind to my poor child," murmured Mrs Strongitharm.

Fiona was honest.

"I keep reminding myself how young she really is, and then it isn't

difficult. For a short time, anyway." She paused and went on, "It is usually easy to follow a principle for a short time, isn't it? Keeping emotional prejudice out of the way. I should always believe the principle was right, but I might not follow it, emotionally. So if I lived with Miss Morley, or if one of my own children—"

She broke off, afraid that she might have gone too far.

"Yes," sighed Mrs Strongitharm. "Time does not make it any better. Rather the opposite. And now that I am left alone to make provision for her, I hardly know what to do for the best."

She turned her sightless face to Fiona and went on, earnestly. "All that you say is so right. And if you, who are sympathetic, know that you couldn't stand it permanently, how can I expect a less understanding person to take on the responsibility and the unpleasantness? My step-sons knew how to manage her. They paid her very little attention, but she respected them. They did not criticise her, or fuss her, or try to make her anything she could not be. They simply took her for granted. But of course they did not have to cope with her bad times. That was left to Mabel and me; latterly, of course, entirely to Mabel."

"She seems rather a wonderful person," said Fiona. "There is no question of her leaving you, I hope?"

"Oh, no." Mrs Strongitharm gave a faint smile. "No. I am thinking of my own departure."

"But surely—" Fiona began politely.

"I must make provisions," said Mrs Strongitharm. "I am old, and not strong. Do you mind discussing this, though we have not known each other very long?"

"Of course not." Fiona did think it strange to receive these confidences on such a slender acquaintance, but she understood the old woman's sense of urgency.

"When you came to see me the first time," Mrs Strongitharm went on, "and were so kind to Joyce, and she was so taken with you, I made some inquiries. You must forgive me for that. It seemed to me possible that a surgeon's home, with an unusually kind and understanding surgeon's wife—I cannot see you, my dear, and I did not know how young you are, nor that you have *young* children. When I was told, of course I saw that it would be out of the question."

"I'm afraid so," murmured Fiona.

"So I must just hope and pray that Humphrey will consent to look after the poor child. He is my brother. Ten years younger, in fact, though people used to say we looked much the same age. It was the hair, I think. In my family we go grey very early. I was quite white when I was forty-two."

"Dark hair generally loses colour early," said Fiona, falling back on this

platitude for want of anything better to say. “But white hair in a youngish woman is very becoming,” she added.

“Yes. I was often told so,” said Mrs Strongitharm, complacently. “My hair was jet black as a girl. We were all dark. But I was telling you about Humphrey. I wrote to him at once after all this happened, begging him to allow me to make him Joyce’s guardian after my death. He has consented to come and stay with us, to see what she is like, and decide whether he can undertake it.”

“Doesn’t he know her?” asked Fiona, in some astonishment.

“Not well. Humphrey has always been a rolling stone,” said Mrs Strongitharm, with a smile. “Never could settle to one profession. But he always seems to succeed in each new venture. Of course he had no ties. It is easier for a single man.”

“Yes,” said Fiona.

“But he is married now, and that is what worries me a little. He may feel it would not be fair on his wife to bring Joyce into their home.”

“Have they any children?”

“Oh, no. Nor likely to. Humphrey is sixty, and she is not a girl by any means.”

“Do you think she would not be the right kind of person to look after Joyce?”

“I don’t know. I have never met her. I have not seen Humphrey for about seven years. He married five years ago. I was asked to the wedding, but my sight was very poor by then, and I did not feel up to it. Humphrey was annoyed with me. Perhaps that is why he has not been to visit me since.”

“But he is coming now?”

Mrs Strongitharm’s face brightened.

“Yes,” she said, cheerfully. “He is coming the day after tomorrow, and will stay for a fortnight, at least.”

Soon after this Fiona said she must go, if she was to keep her promise to Joyce. She shook hands and went away. After a time, Mrs Strongitharm rang the bell for Mabel. The tall maid was slow in coming.

“Did something keep you, Mabel?” her mistress asked, severely. “I had to ring twice.”

“It was Miss Joyce, madam. She was pestering Mrs Goddard. I had to go out in the garden to stop her. I could see the lady wanted to go home.”

“How could you see that? They arranged to look at the garden. It was a promise. Were you following them?”

Mrs Strongitharm could not see the flash of anger in Mabel’s eyes.

“I saw from the window, madam. The upstairs landing window at the back.

Miss Joyce had taken Mrs Goddard to the greenhouses. She looked to me to be getting excited, and the lady seemed to be trying to persuade her to move to another part of the garden."

Mrs. Strongitharm's face was very still.

"Perhaps she was explaining our accident to Mrs Goddard."

"That was what I thought, madam. That was why I went out."

"You were perfectly right to do so, Mabel. How did Joyce take it?"

"Badly for a start. But Mrs Goddard asked her to see her off, and that pleased her."

Mrs Strongitharm nodded.

"Mrs Goddard is exceptionally understanding and kind. I wish—"

"Yes, madam?"

"I wish I might have Mrs Goddard to read the newspaper to me, instead of Mrs Fawcett."

There was silence in the room. If Mrs Strongitharm could have seen the look of satisfied triumph on Mabel's face she would not have asked her next question.

"Would that please you, Mabel?"

The answer was entirely correct.

"If it is what you want, madam."

"Mabel," said Mrs Strongitharm, warmly, "we have known one another now for a great many years, and you can afford to be open with me. Do you trust Mrs Fawcett?"

"In what way, madam?"

The old woman twisted in her chair, turning her face towards her maid.

"Do you think she stole that money?"

There was another silence.

"This is between us two only, Mabel. Do you think she took it?"

"I have no good reason for thinking so."

This was true, for Mabel was quite sure in her own mind that Joyce was the culprit, though she had no proof of it. But she was not going to accuse Joyce. If Mrs Strongitharm chose to suspect Mrs Fawcett, so much the better. The sooner that painted hussy stopped coming, the better pleased they would all be, Jean and Rose, and poor Joyce, too.

"But you will not say you think she did steal?"

"How can I, madam? It is not my place to go making accusations where I have no proof."

Mrs Strongitharm sighed.

"I wondered if you might perhaps have noticed something. I am told she

dresses very extravagantly, and that her income is small. I ought not to gossip, I know. But it makes me very uncomfortable now to have her in the house. I think I will write to Mrs Goddard. She may be too busy to come, but it need be for an hour only a day."

"What will you say to Mrs Fawcett, madam?"

"Thank her for all she has done, and tell her I must not take up any more of her valuable time."

Mabel allowed herself to laugh softly, and Mrs Strongitharm joined her.

"You would not mention the money, madam?"

"Of course not. As you say, we have no proof. It is only a feeling I have that she is not straight. I have felt it for some time. She is not the type of person to give the sort of service she does here from pure generosity. There is something behind it, I'm sure."

"We have all felt that, madam."

"You have? Then I am right to get rid of her."

This seemed to be the final word on the subject. At all events Mrs Strongitharm turned to other topics, and presently Mabel left her again. She went to her own room to think over what her mistress had said. She thought it very unlikely that Mrs Goddard would consent to take Mrs Fawcett's place, but if she did, would they be any better off? This friendship, this most unlikely and disturbing friendship, that seemed to be springing up between her and Joyce. It must be stopped. It was dangerous. There was no knowing what Joyce might not tell her. Already things were getting out about Joyce. And where would that lead?

Presently Mabel went down to the kitchen to have a word with Rose and Jean before they left for home. She relied on them to keep her informed of what was thought and what was being done in Farthing-on-Hone.

By this time there was not a soul in either of the two villages who did not regard Joyce Morley with horror and loathing. Afflicted she might be, but that only made her crime the more hideous. Besides, they began to ask themselves, just how deficient was she? Had she not come among them for years, doing her bits of shopping, talking to the children as she passed, and talking and shopping quite sensibly, too? Certainly she looked a bit off, and she had funny ways of pulling her face about when she was nervous. But then so did old Miss Baron, twitching her mouth sideways, and had done all her life, and nobody could call her a mental deficient. We couldn't all be clever, but that didn't mean to say we hadn't got our heads screwed on the right way round. And when you looked into this business, Miss Morley stood to gain a lot by her step-brothers' deaths. She would come in for everything when the old lady passed away. Miss Morley was quite up to seeing where her advantage lay. And look at what she had done in those two newspapers.

For the people of Farthing-on-Hone, as well as the police, now knew every detail of Joyce's action in the matter of the obituary notices. Constable Plum's daughter, Joycie, had not been able to resist giving her friends a very full, and even glorified, account of her visit to Hanningford Police Station. In the eyes of her school friends she ranked almost as a detective heroine. They believed that her former reticence was deliberate, due to various unspecified investigations she had been making on the quiet.

This view of Joycie's behaviour was not shared by the parents of these friends of hers, but now that their own children's innocence had been abundantly proved, they treated the matter as a subject for ribaldry, rather than anger. Constable Plum, in his turn, was too pleased, in finding himself restored to his own friends, to resent their mild jokes at his expense. So the villagers were united in building up their case against Joyce Morley, and everyone experienced a thrill of imagined danger whenever they met her in one of the Farthing shops; recoiling from her, and drawing their children close to them, as if they feared she might suddenly attack to kill.

Joyce herself noticed nothing of this. She was used to people avoiding contact with her, and the shopkeepers behaved to her as they always had done. Besides, Mrs Neame and the other friends and acquaintances of the family, if they did happen to meet her in the villages or on the roads near by, stopped as usual to have a few words with her. They did not know what the village people thought they knew, and they acted more in pity and respect for Mrs Strongitharm than from any generous impulse towards Joyce herself. And also, from a natural curiosity. If there were any interesting developments at Marsden House, it was possible that Joyce might pass them on. But in this they were disappointed.

The growth of feeling in the Farthings continued, so that no one living there remained uninfluenced by it. Rose and Jean reported its growth to Mabel, who was thereby rendered more and more uneasy. She was volubly indignant over the unofficial charge of murder, but she could not but accept Joyce's guilt in respect of the notices. It fitted too well the theft of money from Mrs Strongitharm's wallet.

How long could she keep all this knowledge and speculation from her mistress? Rose and Jean and Mrs Skinner promised to let out no hints, but there was always Joyce herself. And now this Mrs Goddard. Mabel grew more and more uneasy as the days passed, with nothing happening, not even another visit from Sergeant Forrest. But she knew they had not given up their investigations, and she wondered when the next blow would fall.

She did not have to wait very long. Among those who were influenced by the general feeling at Farthing was young Trevor Wilson, the gardener's grandson. And one evening when he came to collect the goats, he loitered about the path beside the bed where the old man was pricking out some

lettuces.

"What's up?" asked Wilson, irritated by the boy's restless movements.

"That nest of mine," said the boy. "She took it. I saw her."

"What are you talking about? What nest? Who took it?"

"My magpie's nest. That Miss Morley took it. She took it out of the shed."

Wilson was astounded.

"You actually saw her? Where were you?"

Trevor hung his head.

"Up the pear tree," he said, in a low voice.

"Which I forbid you to climb, breaking off the fruit," said his grandfather fiercely. "Is that why you've hid this up to now?"

"Yes, granddad."

"Did she see you?"

"No."

"What else did she do?"

"I don't know. I didn't want her to see me, so I slipped down after she left the shed and went round the back of the stables and left. After a bit."

"Why after a bit?"

"Because of the car."

"Whose car?"

"I don't know. It was in the yard. It's generally in the front drive."

"It was a car you knew, but you don't know whose it is?"

"That's right."

Wilson finished planting his lettuces, then he stood up and took his trowel back to the tool shed, and cleaned it slowly. Trevor stood about, watching him.

"What are you waiting for?" asked the old man, sharply. "You get on down and fetch them goats. I'll be ready time you get back from the meadow."

"What'll you do?" the boy asked.

"It's what you'll do," answered his grandfather. "And that's go straight to Mr Plum, and tell him what you just told me. It'll be Hanningford Police Station for you tomorrow, and put young Joycie's nose out of joint. And a good thing, too, the young madam."

Mabel heard the old man's loud guffaw, and the boy's answering whinny of laughter, as she went along to the kitchen garden with a message for Wilson. But it was not until two days later that Rose told her the latest news from Farthing, news that seemed only to confirm all the former suspicions.

But the impact of this on Mabel was less than it might have been. For by

now she had other things to think about, other anxieties, and a far more potent dread.

Chapter Twelve

Mrs Strongitharm's brother arrived at Marsden House two days later. He came in a taxi from Hanningford.

Humphrey Wainwright was a tall, well-proportioned man, who had kept his figure without becoming scraggy, and looked considerably younger than his age. Mabel was astonished at his appearance, but determined to be discreet.

"Quite a smasher, isn't he?" said Jean, who had opened the front door to him.

"They are a good-looking family," answered Mabel, complacently. "Madam herself was very handsome when I first came to her. Not pretty, she's too big for that. But very striking."

"You're telling me. I'd have been struck off myself, if she didn't know she'd never get another."

"Oh, Jean!" said the placid Rose. "Mabel didn't mean it that way."

"I know she didn't. But I did. Proper old-fashioned old faggot, her ladyship. But Mr Wainwright is different. He looks at you like you were a person, not a piece of the furniture."

"Poor Mrs Strongitharm can't look at anyone no more," sighed Rose, sentimentally.

"You know what I mean," Jean snapped back, seeing herself in a minority.

"Only too well," said Mabel, stiffly. But in private she fully agreed with Jean about Mr Wainwright. It was seven years since she had seen him, and he looked ten years younger than at that time, and she knew very well why, and found it absurd and disturbing in a man of his age. She wondered if she ought to tell Mrs Strongitharm, but decided against it. For she thought she knew the reason. His marriage. Mr Wainwright had fallen in love at an advanced age, and it had had this effect on him. She wouldn't like to discuss that with her mistress. She wouldn't be allowed to do so.

So Mabel remained discreet, and Mrs Strongitharm greeted her brother with affection and no surprise. His voice was unchanged, vigorous and clear, as it had always been.

He, on the other hand, found his sister much altered. The inactivity forced upon her by her blindness and her weak heart had increased her weight. She was a shapeless, ponderous old woman, he saw; and a discontented one, too,

far from reconciled with her condition.

"It has been a long time, Humphrey," Mrs Strongitharm said, turning up her cheek for him to kiss.

"Far too long," he agreed, quietly, but he made no excuse.

She sighed, and left it at that. It would do no good to start an argument so soon. She knew that he shared her own obstinate nature, that neither of them would ever acknowledge blame for the estrangement.

"Have they told you where to leave your car?" she asked.

"I came by train to Hanningford, and taxied out."

"Haven't you got a car?" Mrs Strongitharm was surprised. Humphrey had always been a keen motorist, often possessing fast, expensive cars he could ill afford to run.

"Pip, my wife Phillipa, has it."

"I'm sorry she didn't come with you. I have never met her."

"I know." He was not in the least abashed, and continued cheerfully, "She's gone visiting. Some old friends in Wiltshire."

"Then you will have no car here. We are rather isolated, you know."

"I thought you'd have one. The boys had a car, didn't they? Or have you sold it?"

Mrs Strongitharm was shocked. It was years since she had thought of her step-sons as "the boys," and this was the first time she had been reminded of their car, which, presumably, was still lying idle in the garage.

"They had a car, of course," she said. "But it is part of their estate. Their personal estate."

"Not yours, then?"

"I don't know. Mr Pusey has said nothing about the car. If you want to use it, I'll ask him."

"Do we need to be so formal?"

"Yes, Humphrey, we do. For one thing Mr Pusey has the key of the garage, together with all their keys. And besides, the way they died—"

She broke off, distressed, but recovering herself with an effort, went on, "If you have only seen the short paragraphs in the papers, you cannot know what a terrible time we have been having here, and are still having. I did not tell you much, because I cannot write my own letters, you realise. I have to dictate them. One does not like strangers to know—"

"I quite understand. But I think I must hear it all now. If you can bear to tell me."

His voice had taken on a gentler, more considerate tone, and Mrs Strongitharm responded to this at first with tears, and then with confidences. She poured out the whole dreadful, mysterious business, from the onset of

Hilary's illness, to his undoubted murder at the hospital.

"The police have not told me what they have discovered," she said. "Of course one could not expect that. It is unbelievable, isn't it? And Hugh, only two days before. Perhaps that was deliberate, too. I mean, not an accident, as we thought at first."

"From what you say," her brother said, slowly, "none of it seems to be the action of a sane person. But, as you also say, you have no real details of either case."

"When you said 'sane,' did you mean it might have been a lunatic?"

"Someone abnormal, I should say."

"You are thinking of Joyce," said Mrs Strongitharm, bitterly. "Aren't you?"

"It is difficult to avoid doing so," Humphrey agreed.

There was a silence between them.

"Those obituary notices," he went on. "I saw them in the paper, of course. I didn't realise at the time. The other paragraphs came out so quickly and I hardly noticed the dates. You didn't write for a day or two. But from what you have just told me surely it could only be Joyce who put them in? And very sinister, too, I should say, considering Hilary wasn't dead at all at the time."

Mrs Strongitharm's face was twisted with pain.

"If she did, it was in all innocence, Humphrey. I am convinced of that. I do hope and pray you have not come here prejudiced against her. Because it is for her sake more than my own that I asked you to come. Our ways have never lain close together, have they? We have never shared the same friends or the same tastes. But I am alone now, Humphrey. You are the only close relation I have left. I want you to become Joyce's guardian after my death. I want you to look after her. But with sympathy, Humphrey, and understanding. She is not insane. She is not very abnormal. She is just underdeveloped. She can look after herself in all the ordinary ways: she is clean and not very untidy. She makes little things, knitting and so on. She can read and write and does our small shopping very well. She must not go into a Home, Humphrey. It would break her heart. If you can't have her with you, and it would depend on your wife, I expect, you must find a good private person who will take her and look after her. It might even be possible to get Mabel to set up house with her somewhere. Joyce will be very well off now, you see. That is the danger. But it might help you to decide to look after her."

"In what way?" asked Mr Wainwright, cautiously.

"I would be willing to make a deed giving you control of the money," said his sister. "With a stipulation that you had some of the income for yourself."

"I see. A permanent salary, for the job of keeper-in-chief?"

"Oh, Humphrey!"

"I'm sorry. I'm not really unsympathetic. But I don't much like the prospect, and Pip will almost certainly turn down the idea of having Joyce with us. I tell you what I will do. You can make me her legal guardian, if it can be made legal, without getting her certified, and I'll see she gets fixed up comfortably. But I won't take the bribe."

"It wasn't meant as a bribe. You misunderstand me completely. Anyway, you can't prevent me leaving you something in my will."

"No. I can't prevent that."

Mrs Strongitharm held out her hand and he took it, and held it for a few seconds.

"I am very grateful, Humphrey," she said at last, withdrawing her hand. "It will take a great load off my mind. I must ask Mr Pusey to draw up a deed. As soon as possible."

Mr Wainwright got up from where he was sitting and moved to the window to look out. He gazed at the lawns, the field with the goats, the line of willows marking the river bank. It was a large property. How valuable, he wondered? No one would want such a large house and grounds these days. It could never be sold to a private owner. For development, then? Possibly. And the death duties? He wondered what would be left, eventually, when everything was settled. His sister was very vague. She had not spoken of the investments. He wondered if she knew the extent of them, and where they were lodged.

"This solicitor chap, Pusey," he said. "Is he on his own, or in partnership?"

"Alone, now. He took over the firm some years ago."

"Have you, or rather, I suppose, did the twins, ever keep a check on the Trust funds?"

"I don't know. Why should they?"

"It is just as well. Haven't you? After all, that is where your income comes from, isn't it?"

"Most of it, yes. I left all business to Hugh and Hilary. I don't even know exactly how much there is."

He was answered, and did not feel too pleased.

"You will check everything now, I take it?"

"I suppose so. There has not been time, so far. And it will be difficult. It will really be Mr Pusey checking, won't it? I cannot see the share certificates and deeds."

"Yes. That is a pity."

"What do you mean, Humphrey? You are frightening me. Is there anything wrong about Mr Pusey? Have you heard anything?"

"No. Nothing."

"Then why are you suggesting there might be?"

"I am not suggesting anything. Except that we ought to make a check of everything. Find out where the money is invested, and its value. Find out the value of Marsden itself."

"All that has been done, I expect, for probate, and the death duties. I can't interfere. Mr Pusey is the sole executor."

"I see. That settles it, then. I shouldn't think Marsden can be worth much, now. Pretty unsaleable, isn't it? Might be as well to get rid of it at once, if you can dispose of it, and get something smaller and more manageable."

Mrs Strongitharm sighed.

"Yes," she said. "I have thought of that. It would mean a great uprooting, especially for Joyce."

"It would be easier for her if it happened while you were still with her. And Mabel."

"Yes, Humphrey. I do see that."

She began to feel soothed. Her brother was going to be helpful, after all. He had consented to become Joyce's guardian and now he was being sensible about the property. His next words were even more reassuring.

"Would you like me to look into things a bit for you? In a quiet way. Pusey will know what my position is, and what it will be, when you instruct him about this deed you want drawn up. It would not look odd if I asked him to show me the securities and so on. Everything is lodged with him, I think you said?"

"Yes. Colin thought very highly of him, though he was quite a young man at the time."

Humphrey Wainwright nodded.

"Yes. He was. Didn't I meet him at the funeral? I think I did."

Mrs Strongitharm did not remember. She was not sure that Humphrey had been present at her husband's funeral. Wasn't he in Kenya at that time? She couldn't remember. But she decided that this did not matter. What was important, what mattered very much, was that Humphrey had been so willing to help. She had expected to have to argue with him for days. But he had needed no persuading, or very little. Now she could rest and be at peace for the time that remained to her.

Joyce Morley's first encounter with her uncle was not very successful. When he arrived she had been out on a shopping expedition to Tukesbridge, in search of some new garden sandals. This visit to the town was suggested to her on purpose, so that Mrs Strongitharm could have her long quiet talk with her brother undisturbed. Joyce had tea at a café in Tukesbridge, and reached Marsden House at about six o'clock. She went straight to the drawing room,

chiefly to tell her mother about her amusing afternoon, and to show her the sandals, but also because Mabel had told her she would find Mr Wainwright there. Uncle Humphrey was lying at ease in a deep armchair, reading an evening newspaper. Mrs Strongitharm, reclining on the sofa, had her eyes shut, and seemed to be asleep.

They both looked up when Joyce came into the room, and Mr Wainwright laid down his paper, though he did not get up from his chair.

"Mother!" said Joyce, staring at the stranger.

"Oh, Joyce, is that you?"

Miss Morley turned her back on the man in the chair, and went close to the sofa.

"Mother, I've bought some lovely sandals. Not at all expensive. Red leather. I wish you could see them."

"I'm glad you found something you like, dear. Now you must say how-d'you-do to your Uncle Humphrey."

Joyce turned to stare again, not speaking.

"How are you, Joyce?" Mr Wainwright said, quietly, and added, "Don't you remember me?"

"No," said Joyce, candidly. "I don't. My uncle was an old man. You aren't."

An expression of acute anger flamed for a second in Humphrey's eyes, but he gave a light laugh, saying, "That's quite a compliment, isn't it, Dorothy?"

"You're different," insisted Joyce, in her obstinate, sullen way. "You look different. I don't think you are my Uncle Humphrey, at all."

"Don't be so silly, Joyce," said her mother, impatiently. "Of course he is. Do you think I don't know his voice, even if I can't see him? How could he not be Humphrey? You had better go and find Mabel, dear. Show her your new sandals."

Joyce obeyed, fortunately without making a fuss. Mrs Strongitharm apologised for her rudeness and Humphrey assured her he was not offended. But to Mabel that night Mrs Strongitharm confided the return of her anxiety over Joyce. The poor child must have offended her uncle and she had so hoped they would be friends. It was a poor beginning.

The next few days showed no improvement in Miss Morley's attitude to her uncle, which continued to be one of suspicion augmented by open dislike. She avoided him whenever she could, and he, for his part, only too pleased to escape her embarrassing presence, kept out of her way. At meals they seldom spoke to one another. If they met by accident in the garden they passed without apparent recognition.

Mabel, noticing this unhappy situation, reported it to her mistress with

grave misgiving.

"It'll never do, madam," she said. "Joyce has taken against him from the start. You'll have to speak to her seriously, madam. The gentleman is being very patient with her, but we can all see he isn't going to put up with it much longer. Not in any way permanently. I mean, he won't be likely to keep her with him in the future, madam."

"It wasn't to be that, Mabel. He is to find a good private home for her."

"I can't see him taking the right interest, madam, not as things are going now."

"Oh dear," said Mrs Strongitharm, beginning to sob. "What are we to do? What are we to do?"

"There, there," said Mabel. "You mustn't upset yourself. Have a good talk with her. Tell her straight out what you mean to do for her. That may bring her to her senses, such as they are, poor soul. It's just prejudice, that's all it is."

"She keeps insisting he is not her uncle," said Mrs Strongitharm, blowing her nose, and speaking more firmly. "Such *nonsense*! Is he changed at all in appearance, Mabel? You saw him the last time he was here, six or seven years ago, wasn't it?"

"Yes, madam." Mabel's hesitation was momentary, but Mrs Strongitharm noticed it. "I mean, I saw the gentleman then, madam. He—he looks younger than he did at that time."

"How do you mean? It is what Joyce keeps insisting. In what way is he younger?"

But Mabel had recovered control of herself, and discretion won.

"I really couldn't say, madam."

"You mean you won't say. Never mind, Mabel. But I am not mad, am I? He *is* my brother?"

"Of course, madam."

The shocked emphasis in Mabel's voice reassured the old woman.

"I think you are right about Joyce. I will speak to her, and explain everything."

So that evening, after Mrs Strongitharm had been put to bed, Joyce went to her mother's room for a little talk, as Mabel put it. The result was disastrous.

Joyce's screams of rage and despair brought Mabel running to the room, followed by Mr Wainwright, whose appearance only increased Miss Morley's passion.

"I won't live with him!" she shouted. "I won't have him for my guardian! You can't make me! I told you who I wanted, ages ago. He would look after me. I would do anything he wanted, always."

"What does she mean?" asked her uncle.

"I don't know," whispered Mrs Strongitharm, thoroughly unnerved by the scene.

"She means Mr Pusey, madam," said Mabel, primly.

The sound of the beloved name calmed Joyce on the instant. Her body relaxed, her twisted face fell into its usual heavy lines. Tears flowed from her eyes, but they were gentle tears of exhaustion, not of rage.

"Indeed," said Humphrey Wainwright, mildly. "That is the solicitor, isn't it?"

Joyce allowed Mabel to lead her away.

They kept her in bed the next morning, and Dr Matthews visited her. Afterwards he listened to three separate accounts of her hysteria, from Mabel, Mrs Strongitharm, and Mr Wainwright. The latter was emphatic.

"The strain is killing my sister," he said. "Quite frankly, I think she ought to be put away."

"Where?"

This was not the answer Humphrey had expected, and he looked at Dr Matthews with surprise and some distrust.

"Where? That would be your job, wouldn't it?"

"One that I would not be willing to undertake, I'm afraid. In the first place Miss Morley is not certifiable. She is never violent—"

"You should have seen her last night!"

"Did she attack anyone? Did she threaten to attack? Did she injure herself?"

"N—no."

"Exactly. She was noisy, and perhaps abusive. In countless homes in England, and no doubt all over the world, every day, women in an hysterical rage over some disappointment are noisy and abusive. So are men. They are not certifiable as lunatics or mental deficients."

"My niece *is* deficient."

"Slightly. Yes. If she had been born of humble parents a hundred years ago it would have been overlooked. She would not have been expected to reach a high standard of academic knowledge. Nor even to read and write. Her parents would not have achieved any of those skills. She would have learned housework and cooking and the care of children, and she would not have felt inferior, or not often. We have very exalted standards now. We do not approve of people who must be termed 'simple.' There is no place for the unfortunate Miss Morleys."

"Except in a Home."

"There are no Homes for her like," said Dr Matthews, with rising anger.

“There are not enough Homes for the poor creatures who are grossly deficient, unable to dress or feed themselves, unable to speak, or walk. There are not enough people willing to devote themselves to the unrewarding task of keeping the poor things alive.”

“They ought to be put away,” said Mr Wainwright.

“Now you mean permanently put away, don’t you?” said Dr Matthews. “Killed?”

“It would be merciful,” said Wainwright, steadily.

“It would be difficult to draw the line,” said Dr Matthews. “When you said the same of Miss Morley just now, was that the type of putting away you meant?”

“I consider that rather offensive,” said Mr Wainwright. “And irresponsible. Perhaps you do not know that my sister has appointed me to be Miss Morley’s guardian, after her death.”

“Indeed,” said Dr Matthews. “It is fortunate that Mrs Strongitharm’s health gives no cause for anxiety at the present time.”

“I am very glad to hear it.”

They parted coldly. Humphrey Wainwright did not repeat their conversation to his sister, but he expressed doubts about the doctor’s ability to treat Joyce.

“He doesn’t treat her,” said Mrs Strongitharm. “Only for emergencies. I would not have had him in to see her today, only you were so anxious he should come. Joyce sees a specialist in London, twice a year. I have every faith in him. I want Joyce always to keep up her visits to him. I am going to put that into our deed as one of the conditions of your guardianship. He knows all about Joyce. He knows she must never be certified.”

This confirmation of Dr Matthews’s opinion did not please Humphrey Wainwright, but he did not try to argue. Instead he told his sister he would be away from Marsden House for most of that day, as he had to go to London on business. Whether this were true or not Mrs Strongitharm did not try to discover. It was likely that he wanted to avoid seeing Joyce, and she thought this very sensible.

So Miss Morley, in her uncle’s absence, was allowed to get up and go downstairs for luncheon, and afterwards, instead of lying down in her room, she put on her new red garden sandals, and crept out of the house, while Mabel was in the kitchen talking to Rose and Jean. She walked across the fields to Little Farthing, where she found Fiona Goddard weeding her rockery.

Fiona’s heart sank a little as she saw the bulky figure of Miss Morley stumping up her garden path, but her sympathy rose at the expression of misery in the latter’s small eyes.

“I want to talk to you,” said Joyce, bluntly.

"So you shall."

"Am I interrupting you? Can I help while I talk?"

"Would you like to?"

"Yes."

So Joyce took a small fork and began to weed, very carefully and delicately, Fiona saw. And while she worked she poured out her tale of injury and fear. They were going to sell Marsden. They were going to take her away from everything and everyone she knew and loved. Her uncle, who terrified her, who was strange— Here she became so incoherent that Fiona made her stop and start again. —Anyway, her uncle would be made her legal guardian, not Mr Pusey, who loved her, and whom she loved with all her heart.

This incredible statement shook Fiona into speech.

"Has he—has Mr Pusey—actually proposed to you?" she asked, trying to conceal her unbelief.

"No. But he will."

"Joyce, dear," said Fiona. "You must try to wait until he does. You must try not to build hopes too soon. I know you are in love with him—or you think you are."

"I am," said Joyce, loudly.

"Yes. But until two people feel the same way, and have shown one another how they feel—both of them, Joyce—it is not possible to be sure."

"I am sure."

She said it so calmly, with such a luminous assurance in her eyes, that Fiona was shaken with pity and foreboding.

"So you see," Joyce went on, her face crumpling again into self-pity and despair. "If they take me away from him, I shan't be able to bear it. Nor will he. I shan't let them. I won't have Uncle Humphrey for my guardian! If Mother goes on with it, I shall kill her! I shall kill her! I shall kill her!"

She dropped the garden fork on the rockery, she sprang away towards the gate. Fiona went after her, but could not catch her. She ran off up the road, her thick legs moving clumsily but fast. Fiona saw her plunge over the stile that led on to the footpath back to Marsden.

After a little thought she went back into her house. She rang up Marsden and told Mabel, who answered her call, that Miss Morley had been to see her, and had seemed to be rather upset. So much so that she had left without staying to tea.

"I think she has gone straight home," Fiona said, in answer to Mabel's anxious question. "Will you tell her that I will be seeing her in the morning, because I am coming to read to her mother. Or perhaps Mrs Strongitharm has already told her I am taking over from Mrs Fawcett."

"No, madam," answered Mabel, quietly. "I don't think she has been told.

But I will speak to Mrs Strongitharm. It would be a good thing to tell her. It might soothe her."

"I hope so," said Fiona, and rang off. She wondered if she ought to have told Mabel what Miss Morley had said about her mother and about Mr Pusey. When Bill came home that evening she spoke to him instead. Her account of Miss Morley's behaviour left him thoughtful, but he told her she had done right in not describing it in full to Mabel Thorne.

Chapter Thirteen

Fiona arrived in good time at Marsden House the next morning. Mrs Strongitharm received her in the library and congratulated her upon her punctuality. Nothing was said about Miss Morley: no mention of her visit to the surgeon's house the day before, of her talk with Fiona, or of her abrupt departure. Mrs Goddard wondered if Mrs Strongitharm had decided to ignore the whole incident, or if she had not been told anything about it. If Mabel had been there she would have asked a leading question, but the tall maid did not appear, and when, after the newspaper reading, Mrs Strongitharm did mention her, it was to say, vaguely, that she might be out with Joyce.

Anyway, Fiona decided, the result was the same. They would not discuss Miss Morley, and she would not see her that morning. Fiona was rather relieved than otherwise.

All the same, Mrs Strongitharm seemed to be very absent-minded; not at all the alert, if complaining, old lady Fiona had taken tea with a few days before. After dictating two letters in a hesitant, disconnected fashion, Mrs Strongitharm said, "You must forgive me, my dear. My mind is not on what I am doing. And yet I want to finish my letters quickly, because I am expecting my lawyer, Mr Pusey, to come here very soon."

"Would you rather I left now, Mrs Strongitharm? These letters only reached you two days ago. There is nothing very urgent to answer in them."

"I like to keep my correspondence up to date. It saves a great deal of trouble, and reading letters several times over."

"Just as you like, of course."

Mrs Strongitharm applied her mind more firmly to her self-imposed task, and soon the letters were done. Fiona promised to be there again at the same time the next morning, and was shown out of the house by Jean, who appeared in the hall the instant she opened the library door. Though Mrs Strongitharm had not rung any bell, Fiona reflected. Perhaps the girl had been dusting the hall. She had a duster in her hand.

"Is Miss Morley out?" she asked Jean, as she moved on to the wide steps of the house.

"Yes, madam. Mabel has gone with her to Hanningford on the bus."

"Tell her I was sorry to miss her, but I will be here again tomorrow at the same time."

"Yes, madam."

As Fiona drove away she met another car coming in. They passed slowly in the narrow drive, so she was able to have a good look at the other driver. Mr Pusey, she decided. Miss Morley's infatuation seemed to her more ludicrous and pathetic than ever. This very commonplace, middle-aged man, with his lank dark hair, so thin on the top, his spectacles, and his irresolute mouth. How could anyone, however simple, fall in love with that? Anything more wet! To look at, anyway. She hoped he was a good lawyer, for Mrs Strongitharm's sake. She also remembered the gossip about Mrs Fawcett. Well, if Mr Pusey was her attraction, too, there must be some mysterious power in him that was not at all apparent to the eye. She laughed to herself as she drove on.

When she saw Bill later that day he wanted to know all about her visit to Marsden House. She told him, with an added note about her encounter in the drive.

"The solicitor? Did you speak to him?"

"No. He was in his car, and I was in mine."

"Yes. You said. I saw him once myself, that time he came up to the ward to try to see Hilary Strongitharm. Dark hair, you say? I'd forgotten that."

"Dark, but not much of it. I could see that, even from my car."

"Um? —Oh, thin on the top, is it?"

"That's what I said."

"What you said?"

"Darling, where have you slipped off to? You're not listening? What's the idea?"

"Oh, nothing."

Mr Pusey placed a small table near to Mrs Strongitharm's chair, in the library of Marsden House, set an upright chair on the opposite side of the table, sat down on it, and opened his brief case. The old lady heard the stiff crackle of legal paper.

"Is that the document, all ready?" she asked. "You have been quick."

"You asked me to waste no time."

"Yes, I did."

She fell silent and Mr Pusey waited. Then she said, "I sent Mabel out this morning with Joyce. I did not think you would be ready so soon. What a pity I didn't keep Mrs Goddard here."

"I passed her as I came in," said Mr Pusey.

"Do you know her?" Mrs Strongitharm was surprised.

"I know *of* her. I have met her husband, once."

"Yes, of course."

"And I heard," went on Mr Pusey, cautiously, "that she had taken over the post of reading to you and writing your letters."

"It is not a post. It is the W.V.S. Where did you hear it?"

"From the W.V.S.," said Mr Pusey, truthfully.

He watched his client, but saw no reaction of any kind in the plump, pale face. Obviously her thoughts were elsewhere; her curiosity had not lasted.

"Well, Mr Pusey," she said, after a little pause, "I have changed my mind."

"I beg your pardon?"

"I have changed my mind about Miss Morley; about making Mr Wainwright her guardian. He does not get on well with her, nor she with him. She keeps accusing him of being changed, and I must say, from the way he talks, I am inclined to believe her. He is more casual, more—perhaps *shallow,* if that is the word I want—certainly more callous towards suffering. This is in strict confidence, of course."

"Naturally," said Mr Pusey. The document he still held crackled again as he put it down on the table. "Have you considered an alternative plan, Mrs Strongitharm?"

"Not fully. It has occurred to me that I might leave my will as it is, my personal estate going to Joyce. She would have enough to provide for her comfort, with some small luxury. And she would not be in danger of becoming a prey of sharks and wolves. I would leave most of the residue to charity, or must I leave Marsden to Humphrey?"

"Mr Wainwright would be a very fortunate man if you did," said Mr Pusey, with a bitter note in his voice. "He would benefit more from not undertaking the guardianship than if he did so."

"The guardianship," said Mrs Strongitharm, with a sigh. "This problem is a torment with no relief, Mr Pusey."

He did not answer, and soon she went on.

"You once made me an offer with regard to Joyce," she said. "You offered to become her guardian, yourself."

Suppressing his sudden and mounting excitement, Mr Pusey nodded, remembered to whom he was speaking, and said, hoarsely, "Yes, Mrs Strongitharm. And I meant what I said."

"Then I should like to ask you to undertake it, after my death, and I am prepared to give you a suitable fee or retainer, or whatever it is called; or, if you prefer it, a part of the property outright, the equivalent of such a sum. Will you do this? Joyce knows you and likes you, as I told you once before. The Discretionary Trust gives full control of her money, I think you said, but Joyce trusts you and will take your advice. She utterly refuses to take her uncle's."

"I will do that. And I will see that Miss Morley is comfortable and happy

in a home of her own, or with someone she really likes."

"Thank you. Then perhaps you will take away this deed," said Mrs Strongitharm, feeling on the table for the prepared document and handing it back to Mr Pusey. "I am sorry you have had to waste your time. I would rather my brother did not see it, as we shall not use it now. I will, of course, leave him something substantial."

Mr Pusey stuffed the document back into his brief case with mixed feelings, in which triumph predominated. Clearly Mr Wainwright had behaved like a fool, a prejudiced fool. He had missed his chance, but probably the man was well enough off not to care. Unlike himself.

Mrs Strongitharm began to speak again, and Mr Pusey applied himself to the task of taking her instructions for a new will. When he had made a detailed list of her bequests, he went away, in a busy agony of plan-making. If things went right he would come out on top, with every danger scotched, every former risk covered, every mistake rectified. He decided to work on the new will and deed of Trust that night, to finish both the next day, and present them to Mrs Strongitharm for signature the morning after that. As he told Diana Fawcett that evening, turning her out of his house with regretful tenderness, "This is the big moment, Di. My big chance. If this goes through I'm made, and you'll have to get your divorce. I'll be able to give you everything you want."

"How long for?" Diana asked, playfully. "You don't know me!"

Did he not—even now? The chill thought rose unbidden, and would not be silenced. But he kissed her and explained how he had scored off Humphrey Wainwright, and how the tactless brother had blotted his copybook, and how he, Lionel Pusey, had taken advantage of the situation and jumped into the vacancy with both feet together.

"Aren't you wonderful?" said Diana, returning his kiss. For once in his life he really thought he was. It did not occur to him that he was betraying Mrs Strongitharm's confidence. But the thought would not have troubled him.

At Marsden House Mrs Strongitharm herself did not keep the secret. She confided what she had done to Mabel, who expressed warm relief.

"It was not for me to criticise, madam," she said. "But I was that uneasy. Only you won't leave Miss Joyce poorly off, will you? It would break her heart, and mine, madam, to leave Marsden, where we've been all these years."

"You want to stay here, always?" asked Mrs Strongitharm, incredulous. "Even after I'm gone?"

"I wouldn't want to leave Joyce," said Mabel.

"I thought you stayed on my account."

"On both, madam."

"You are a good friend, Mabel," said Mrs Strongitharm, and was silent.

Privately, she had no intention of re-arranging her will a third time so that Mabel could, some day, preside over Marsden. For that was what it would be, if they stayed on. No. She had left Mabel a very suitable legacy, and if, with that, she still wanted to look after Joyce, and the poor child wanted to keep her, they could make their own arrangements.

Mrs Strongitharm did not tell her brother what she had done, but she did mention the fact that Mr Pusey had called in the morning, and was coming again the day after next to bring her the papers to sign.

"You, being a beneficiary, will not be allowed to witness my will," she said, smiling. "In fact, Humphrey, I don't want to keep you here if you are longing to get away. It is dull for you, and with Joyce—"

"With Joyce hating my guts, as you are too polite to say, you would like to get rid of me."

"No, Humphrey. I did not say that, and I do not mean it. We see all too little of each other, but that has always been the case, more's the pity. Only I do feel you are not comfortable here, and would be happier at home with your wife."

"Ah! Phillipa. You are still a bit annoyed she did not come too, aren't you?"

"I am still disappointed."

"I'm sorry. I'll go the day after tomorrow."

He is waiting until I have signed, thought Mrs Strongitharm, now quite sure she had not enough courage to tell him of her fresh intentions. After he had gone she would write to him. Perhaps a few months later, to make it seem a new idea. In the meantime Joyce must be kept out of his way. Perhaps Mrs Goddard would help in this.

Fiona did, indeed, see Miss Morley for a few minutes the next morning, after she left the library.

Joyce was calm, and quite reasonable. Her uncle was going away, she told her friend, the next morning. Perhaps when he had gone she would be able to persuade her mother to change her mind about him, and about leaving Marsden. If not—

"If not?" Fiona echoed.

But Miss Morley had turned her face away and did not repeat her former threat. Only when Fiona was driving towards the gates did she turn round again, to wave her hand, and watch the car out of sight.

It was a hot, sunny day, and Joyce spent most of it in the garden. Mr Wainwright, on the other hand, stayed indoors, chiefly in his own room. It was clear to the staff that he had quarrelled with his sister and was avoiding

both her and his niece. Opinion in the kitchen was divided.

"I'm for him every time," said Jean. "I think he's smashing. He has a way of looking at you— And his smile—"

"I'd never have thought you would be so soppy, Jean," Rose told her, indignantly. "Looks and smiles! What does that add up to? He's upset Miss Joyce and anyone can see Mrs Strongitharm is worried out of her life. She was looking a lot better till he came. Wasn't she, Mabel?"

But Mabel would not be drawn into the argument. She had much on her own mind, and it was not the sort of thing to discuss with Rose and Jean.

So the quiet, but uneasy, day came to an end. Joyce Morley went for a final tour of the garden after her supper. The sun had gone down behind the stables, and the lawn was in shadow. In the rose garden, too, the light was fading, and only the paler flowers showed among the darkening leaves. But the last slanting rays of gold fell on the willows by the river bank, and Joyce stood for a long time, looking across the hedge and the meadow, thinking of the river and of Little Farthing on the other side of it where her new friend Fiona Goddard lived.

It was quite dark on the terrace when she went back to the house at last; and her sandals, wet with the heavy dew, left dark patches on its stones. Mabel had fastened the french windows, so she had to make her way to the front of the house. She found that door locked, too, and turned back, retracing her steps round the terrace. As she passed the french windows again, Mabel came hurrying towards her across the lawn.

"Where have you been? You gave me quite a turn!"

"Why? I was only in the garden. The doors are all shut. I'm going round to the back door now."

"You're soaking wet," said Mabel, feeling her arm.

"It's only dew."

"Dew or no dew, you've no business to stay out so long, giving us all frights."

"Who's frightened? Mother? Uncle Humphrey?"

"Come along in, and don't ask silly questions."

"They weren't silly. It's you that's frightened, Mabel. And that's silly, anyway."

They went into the warm kitchen, and Mabel made hot cocoa for them both. Then they went upstairs.

There was no one now in any of the big rooms below. The hall and staircase were in darkness. Joyce went to say goodnight to her mother, who was already in bed. There was a light, she noticed, in her uncle's room, but she did not want to say goodnight to him. She passed on into her own bedroom, undressed, and stood at the open window, looking out again towards

the river, now hidden in darkness. She wondered idly why Mabel had been so startled in the garden. Had she been looking for her? In the kitchen garden? Why there? Didn't Mabel know she never went into the kitchen garden now? Not since the day she had taken Fiona there to show her the hothouse. Because she did not want to see the empty hothouse again; the cold, empty place that had once been like a warm aquarium, strange, repellent, fascinating.

Presently Mabel came in, to drive her to bed, tuck her up, and kiss her goodnight. Mabel, telling her the most wonderful news, that after all, Mr Pusey would be her guardian. Only she must keep it a secret, always. Mabel ought not to have let it out, she said. Joyce hugged her, as she had not done for years. After Mabel had gone she stayed awake for a long time, but at last fell into a heavy sleep.

She woke suddenly, with an acrid smell in her nostrils, and a feeling that she had heard a door shut with a snap. Her door? She got out of bed quickly and moved across the room. Her door was shut, but the smell of smoke came through it. She went out on to the landing. As she did so, she heard a faint cry of alarm from the end of the passage, and saw, with a thrill of fear, a red glow under the door of her mother's room. As she stood, too frightened to move, the door opened, and Mrs Strongitharm tottered out, wreathed in the smoke that billowed after her. Joyce gave a loud cry and sprang forward.

Confusion and chaos enveloped her. The darkness was filled with smoke and cries and fleeting forms that swelled and shrank in the dying red glow, and hands holding her, hands pushing her away, hands that tore at her nightdress, hands she fought with, dragging them away, thrusting them from her.

Her mother's soft bulk strained against her, her voice crying, insistent, terrified, "Mabel, Mabel, where are you?" Joyce clutched at the mass, reeling with it, choking from the smoke, but conscious of that bulk, that smell of flesh and sweet powder that had always been her mother, and to which, in her own terror, she now clung, eyes closed, in fierce desperation. But the hands were there all the time, tearing, pulling, clutching.

Then, quite suddenly, a scream stopped her heart, and she was alone, in a box of darkness, torn by the long dreadful scream. Her knees gave way and she sank into a heap on the landing.

But a second later the light was switched on, and Joyce's staring eyes, looking up from the carpet, saw Mabel's white face bending over her, and beyond that her Uncle Humphrey, in pyjamas, at the door of his room.

"Fire!" cried Joyce, scrambling up. "Mother!"

"Where?"

"Her room."

Mabel rushed into Mrs Strongitharm's bedroom, putting on the light there as she did so.

A heap of paper and rags still smouldered in the grate, giving out clouds of smoke as the draught fanned it. The bed was empty.

"Where is she?" Mabel panted, back on the landing, leaning over Joyce, who had once more collapsed, and dragging her up on to her feet.

"She was here. They were all here. Pulling— Snatching— Hands! — She screamed!"

Neither of the women had noticed Humphrey Wainwright leave his door and lean over the banisters. They were both thrust on one side as he leaped to the head of the stairs with a loud cry, pointing downwards.

"She's there! Look down! She must have fallen—"

The hideous confusion, the clamour, the cries, began again. Joyce crouched against the wall of the landing, pressing her hands over her ears, keeping her eyes tight shut. But not for long. Her uncle's strong hands seized her roughly and set her on her feet. Terrified, she opened her eyes to look at him.

"You pushed her down!" he said. His face, white, stern, accusing, was close to her own. "Your own mother! Dead!"

"No! No!"

"What is that in your hand?"

She stared stupidly at the fragment of torn lace, and flung it from her. Mr Wainright picked it up.

"Your mother's nightdress," he said, slowly. "You pushed her, and you have killed her."

Joyce began to scream. Mabel came running up the stairs.

"Dr Matthews will be here directly," she told Mr Wainwright, and put an arm round Joyce.

"There, there! Stop, Joyce! Stop it at once!"

"He says I killed her," Joyce wailed. "It isn't true. She isn't dead. I didn't kill her! I tried to hold on to her. The hands were pulling and tearing! I did hold on! I did! I never pushed her!"

She stopped suddenly, frozen by a thought so terrible it took her breath away. She moved back until she was pressed against the wall, staring at Mabel, remembering and staring.

"You were here all the time," she said. "It was you. You killed her!"

Chapter Fourteen

In the library of Marsden House, as the dawn light filtered through the curtains, the police conducted their third set of inquiries.

"It doesn't make sense, sir, does it?" Sergeant Forrest said, in the reasonable voice that Inspector Stewart found so exasperating.

"It would make perfect sense, if these odd facts didn't keep cropping up."

"That's what I mean, sir. Miss Morley—"

"Miss Morley is the one character who has been on the spot at, or just after, the deaths of three people, all closely connected with her, and whose collective removal leaves her in possession of a considerable fortune. Classic motive, complete opportunity. And every damned time, evidence of someone else there as well. Take them in order, what have we?"

"Hugh Strongitharm. Trevor Wilson's evidence, and my own. There was a car in the stable yard at the time of Hugh's death, belonging, we think, to Mrs Fawcett."

"Friend of Pusey, the Strongitharm lawyer, who was considerably worked up over the supposed accident, and also over Hilary's illness. Pusey's business affairs have been a bit rocky every now and then, for some time, I gather, ever since he took over the practice, solo. Worse since he took up with Mrs Fawcett. She had plenty of opportunity to get paper and rags from Marsden House to stuff in that chimney."

"Motive?"

"If Pusey is in trouble over money he might have thought he'd be safer without the twins; able to twist the old lady round his finger when she inherited. He may have got Mrs Fawcett to help him."

"Is that good enough?"

"No. Of course it isn't. Besides, we're as sure as we can be that Miss Morley tampered with the chimney. We have no evidence at all that anyone else did."

The two men looked at each other, then Sergeant Forrest continued.

"Hilary Strongitharm. Miss Morley was in the hospital, waiting to see him. First-class opportunity. We know she left the newspapers in his room. We know she put the notices in the Deaths columns. We think she turned the pillow over. We think she had previously been giving him aspirin, which was dangerous in the circumstances."

"Any jury would convict on all that," said Inspector Stewart, "if it wasn't for that fellow, Barker."

"He's spilled now, hasn't he?"

"Oh, yes. Nurse Barker has accounted for the gap in his morning. It was a skirt, as we thought all along. Typist. She'd been warned twice for taking time off to see him. He didn't want to get her fired."

"Was she fired?"

"They both were. It doesn't help us. Sister Wright and the barber both saw Barker's impersonator. There was someone else there."

"Miss Morley couldn't have borrowed a mask and gown? It's an effective disguise, isn't it?"

"Except for the hair. Whoever it was had nothing on the head. Sister recognised Barker, or thought she did, by the black hair. Miss Morley's is brown, light brown. Besides, you've got to remember the woman is sub-standard. She's not capable of all that, even if there was a gown and mask handy in that ward, and Sister says there wasn't. Not handy enough, anyway."

"Mrs Fawcett has black hair," said Sergeant Forrest.

"So has Pusey, though it's thin on the top."

"Have they got alibis?"

"Of course they have. Mrs Fawcett was at Marsden House, reading to the old lady. And Pusey was in his office, telephoning from there to Sister Wright."

Sergeant Forrest shook his head, sadly.

"But someone, in a gown and a mask, went into Hilary Strongitharm's room and strangled him," he said.

"Suffocated him. Not the same thing."

"Does it make any difference to the identity of the murderer, sir?"

"How do I know?" said Inspector Stewart, furiously.

Sergeant Forrest looked away. He cleared his throat, and said, in a respectful voice, "This new case. Mrs Strongitharm. Dr Matthews is certain she was murdered."

The gloom on Inspector Stewart's face lifted a little.

"Thank God he came here at once; and thank God that maid of hers wouldn't let anyone near the body till he came. After the first shock, that is."

"Miss Morley was on the spot when it happened, and very hysterical, by all accounts."

"Yes. Dr Matthews says she accuses Miss Thorne, but the maid told him she only reached the landing from her own room on the top floor just before Mrs. Strongitharm must have fallen. The smoke had woken her a few seconds before and she rushed down at once. The landing was in darkness, she told

him, but she saw the figures silhouetted against a dim light from the staircase window. We've still to see Miss Thorne, of course."

"It seems to have woken Miss Morley a good deal earlier. The smoke, I mean."

"Perhaps she was responsible for making it. The materials for the fire were very similar to the bundle in the hothouse flue. On the face of it you could say it was a mad woman's attempt to burn her mother. Initially it failed, but it smoked the old woman out of her room and then her murderous daughter pushed her downstairs. Another convincing story for the jury. Taken with the fact of Miss Morley's hysteria and the bit of lace from her mother's nightdress that she was holding, there could hardly be a clearer case."

"Motive?"

"Same one, with additions. She thought her uncle was going to be her guardian. She knew Mr Pusey came to see her mother the day before yesterday. She knew she had been sent out of the way with Mabel. She told me so."

"She wanted to stop the business going through?"

"Presumably."

"How did she know it wasn't already signed and sealed?"

"She asked the maids if they'd witnessed her mother's signature. She isn't all that balmy, you know. She gets excited, and she can't follow an argument, and she has kids' ideas about most things. But you'd be surprised what she does know."

"Perhaps Mabel put her up to asking. It's my opinion Mabel is a bit of a dark horse."

"Dark," said Inspector Stewart, thoughtfully. "Yes, she has dark hair, too."

"But she certainly wasn't at the Hanningford General the morning Hilary died, wearing a theatre gown or otherwise. She was at Marsden, and we know she was."

"All the same," the Inspector went on, "Dr Matthews found those hairs under Mrs Strongitharm's finger nails, and they were dark, jet black, they looked to me. But we're waiting for the report on them."

"This Mr Wainwright," said Sergeant Forrest. "He's very set against his niece. Certain she killed her mother, and thinks she may have done for the brothers, too. Wants her shut up. I suppose he hadn't any motive?"

"On the contrary. He'd undertaken to act as guardian to Miss Morley in the future, though he didn't look forward to it. He wanted to put off the evil hour as long as possible, was what he said to me."

"Was he taking it on for love?"

"No. His sister was making over some of the property to him. And he'd have complete control of Miss Morley's money, under some sort of Trust, he

said."

"Isn't that a prime motive?"

"Could be. Get hold of the money, salt it away, and put her in a Home at low expense."

"Something like that."

"He seems fair enough to me. But it might be all hooey, what he said about putting off the evil hour."

"It might. All the same he's only been at Marsden House a few days. He hasn't visited his sister for years."

The discussion died. The two men looked at one another despondently. Then Sergeant Forrest asked, with apparent irrelevance, "Did Mr Pusey meet this Mrs Fawcett here, in Hanningford?"

"I believe so."

"Funny set-up that, don't you think?"

"How d'you mean?"

"I'd never have said he was her style, would you, sir?"

"You see some queer things in this world. From his point of view it's understandable. She's smart, exciting, if you like that sort of excitement—"

Sergeant Forrest blushed.

"That's what I mean, sir. Why did she come to Hanningford at all? A bitchy piece like that. Been on the stage—divorced—"

"No. She's not divorced."

"Separated, then. Why did she come to Hanningford? That's what I want to know."

"And that's what I'm going into now. Now that we know, or think we know, that her car was up at Marsden House when Hugh died. That car may help us quite a bit."

Forrest nodded hopefully.

"Time to get a move on," said the Inspector. "Let's have in Miss Thorne."

Later that morning, Fiona Goddard, who had been forgotten at Marsden House, drove there at her usual hour, and found the windows draped, and confusion within.

Jean, white-faced, unlike herself, whispered the news. Fiona's first thought was for poor Joyce.

"Miss Morley?" she asked.

Jean shook her head.

"They're keeping her doped," she answered. "On account of her trying to throw herself out of the window."

"Did she do that?"

"Mabel says so."

Fiona was aware of a tall figure behind the other maid. Jean saw the recognition, gasped, and hurried away.

"Can I help you, madam?" asked Mabel, impressively formal.

"I would not have come if I'd known," Fiona said, cutting across etiquette. "But is there anything I can do? If Miss Morley would like to see me—"

"Miss Morley is asleep, madam. Dr Matthews has forbidden visitors. She was fearfully shocked, as is natural, seeing she was there when it happened."

"How ghastly! Does anyone know *how* it happened? Jean said something about a fire."

"The girls pick on rumours very easily, madam."

"Don't you know?"

"I would rather not discuss it, madam. The police are in charge."

Fiona stared. Again. A third death in this family and Joyce Morley again involved.

"I'll go," she said. "There is obviously nothing I can do. Will you give Miss Morley a message when she is awake? Will you tell her that I am shocked and grieved by this news, and that I am thinking of her."

"Thank you, madam," said Mabel, and this time there was a break in the correct voice. "You are most kind."

Fiona went home, and for two days, apart from the newspaper reports, she heard nothing more. Then, on the third afternoon, as she was sitting in her garden, in the shade of a tree, for the sun was very hot that day, she heard footsteps, and Miss Morley, panting and dishevelled, hurried towards her.

Fiona jumped up, both startled and dismayed. The visitor was not only out of breath and dripping with sweat, but her eyes were wild, with a distant, fixed stare that terrified her. She made her sit down, took off her heavy cardigan, and went into the house for iced water. When she came back she found, to her horror, that Joyce had slipped off the chair on to the ground, and lay there with her eyes shut, moaning faintly.

Fiona persuaded her to sit up, to drink some of the water. She soothed her as she would one of her own children, and presently Joyce clambered back into the garden chair, took out her handkerchief and mopped her face.

"I had to see you," she said.

"Yes, of course. Why not?"

"They've been shutting me up. They locked my door, till I told Mabel I would climb out of the window."

So there was some truth in Jean's story, Fiona thought. Then why had Mabel written it off so contemptuously? Her pity increased as she looked at

the poor broken-down creature beside her. But some of her pity was chilled as the complaining voice went on. “They thought I wanted to kill myself. But I would never do that. Why should I? Now Mother is dead, Marsden belongs to me. No one can take it from me. Not even Uncle Humphrey.”

“Is your uncle still there?” asked Fiona, not knowing what to say.

“Yes, he is. But I won’t let him stay. Not after I’ve seen Lionel.”

Her sweat-streaked, tear-stained face lit up, as she spoke, with an inner glow that shone out of her reddened eyes so strangely that Fiona’s misgivings were once more raised.

“You have not seen Mr Pusey since your mother died?”

“They won’t let me. They kept me asleep a whole day and two nights. I feel queer still. That’s why I was upset when I got here. That and it being a hot day, and running all the way, in case they saw me.”

“Who do you mean by they?”

“Uncle Humphrey and Mabel. Not together. They hate each other. But, you see, they both think I pushed Mother downstairs. And I know I didn’t, so you see—” and here she leaned over towards Fiona, with sly cunning glinting in her small eyes “—you see, they were the only other people in the house that night, so it must have been one of them.”

“Wasn’t it an accident?” cried Fiona, revolted by the suggestion, and more particularly by Miss Morley’s way of making it.

The latter shook her head.

“No. Mother held on to me, and I held her. She was very frightened, because of the fire in her room. I was frightened, too. I thought it was a real fire, but it wasn’t, you know. I was very frightened, so I kept my eyes shut. It was all dark, and I tried to hold on to her, but there were hands pulling us apart. Hands!”

Her voice rose, and her mouth began to twist.

“Stop!” said Fiona, in a clear, stern voice. Joyce subsided. “Now listen. I don’t believe there is any kind of conspiracy against you, of the kind you suggest. I have no idea how the accident happened, but until it is proved not to have been one, you must try to believe it was, and hope for that, too. I want to help you, Joyce, but it doesn’t do any good for you to start accusing people. If Dr Matthews kept you asleep it was the right thing, I’m sure.”

“It wasn’t right to lock me in my room,” Joyce said, sullenly. Then she threw back her head and laughed. “They didn’t know I’ve got a key of my own. I’ve had it for years and years. I found it in a drawer, years and years ago. I never told anyone.” She turned to Fiona, anxiously. “You won’t tell them, will you?”

“It is not my business to interfere with anything you do,” said Fiona, steadily.

Again Miss Morley's face softened, as it had at the thought of Mr Pusey.

"Why are you so kind to me?" she asked, with a certain awkward dignity. "You can't like me. No one does. I'm too different."

Fiona could have wept for all the wasted years of this life. But she managed to answer cheerfully, "Don't say silly things, Joyce. Of course I like you. Are you rested? Have you cooled off?"

"Yes. I'm much better now."

"Then we will have tea together and afterwards I will walk back to Marsden with you."

Joyce made no objection to this plan. They walked back over the fields. As they crossed the old bridge over the Hone, on their way to the footpath stile, Joyce gathered some twigs to throw into the water.

"Pooh-sticks," said Fiona. "We all play that, too."

They watched their twigs disappear under the bridge, and moved across to see them come out on the other side.

"You've won," said Fiona, with slightly forced gaiety.

"No, I haven't. My stick was the long one. You're only saying that to please me."

"Yes," said Fiona. "I'm sorry. I always cheat against myself when I play with the children."

"I'm not a child," said Miss Morley, stiffly. They went on in silence.

It was hot and still in the fields. There was no breeze, and the sun was held in by tall hedges. A cloud of flies danced over the high grass and hummed round their heads as they moved. The flies swarmed, too, round the bent heads of the cows, which shook them off with patient repetition as they grazed the lush field. Under a big oak near the second stile some horses stood in the shade, head to tail, protecting one another from the onslaught of the flies.

At last the two women left the fields and were out in the lane leading to the road from Farthing.

"We could go in by the stables, if you like," said Joyce. "I'd rather they thought I'd been in the garden."

"No," said Fiona. "If I'm with you we mustn't pretend. You have nothing to be afraid of. We will go into the house by the front door."

But in the drive they met Rose, looking hot and cross.

"Well, I never! There you are, Miss Joyce! We've been looking for you all over."

"Why?" asked Joyce.

"Miss Morley walked over to see me," said Fiona, quietly. "She stayed to tea, and as it is such a lovely day, I walked back with her. I wonder if I could speak to Miss Thorne?"

A man's voice interrupted them.

"You can speak to me," he said.

Joyce shrank against Fiona, who put an arm round her.

"I beg your pardon?" she said, very coldly.

"This is Mrs Goddard, sir," Rose told him. "She used to read to Mrs Strongitharm. From the W.V.S."

"I beg your pardon," said Humphrey Wainwright. "But we have been in a great turmoil here, as I expect you know. And then, with my niece's sudden disappearance—"

"I can go for a walk when I like," said Joyce, loudly. "Mrs Goddard is my friend."

And now Mabel came hurrying from the house, and after a little persuasion Joyce Morley followed her in. Fiona and Mr Wainwright stood in the drive, watching them.

"Poor creature," he said, shaking his head. "What will become of her, now?"

Fiona did not answer. She felt that she knew too much, and also too little, about the strange situation at Marsden. After a suitable pause she said goodbye to Humphrey Wainright and walked home.

That evening Bill Goddard listened to a full account of his wife's strange experiences.

"She isn't mental," Fiona insisted. "Only childish and eccentric. They won't be able to certify her, will they?"

"Not if she has not done anything grossly irresponsible, irrational, dangerous," answered Bill. "Or criminal."

"I'm sure not criminal."

"Time will show. Pretty soon, now, I should imagine."

"Was Mrs Strongitharm—murdered?"

"Matthews thinks so. For several good reasons. I am inclined to trust his opinion. He was right over the others."

Fiona repeated Joyce's description of the scene on the landing.

"Would it be possible for anyone else to have been there? I mean, someone from outside? Started that fire in Mrs Strongitharm's room and then hung about the landing in the dark? There are some back stairs at the end of the landing. They could have got away later down those."

"As far as I'm concerned, anything is possible. I don't know any of the facts this time. Are you thinking of anyone in particular?"

"N—no."

"You are, though. Aren't you? Mrs Fawcett."

"Well, actually, Mr Pusey."

"Why?"

"Joyce told me, last week, I think it was, that her mother was going to make the uncle guardian of herself and her fortune. Only this was never signed. She wanted Mr Pusey to be her guardian."

"That would be in favour of Joyce doing her mother in, not Pusey. What motive could he have? And didn't you tell me she once threatened her mother in your hearing?"

"She didn't mean it. I'm sure of that."

"I don't see how you can be."

Fiona moved restlessly.

"I wish I didn't feel so sorry for her. I hate being mixed up in all this."

"You aren't, much. And it's your own fault. Who wanted to get in touch with the Marsden set-up? Who was curious and wanted to find out what it all meant?"

"I know. Don't remind me. I am well punished. I try to keep out, now. Mr Wainwright, that's the uncle, wanted to start a discussion, but I simply left. I didn't much like him, anyway."

"Why?"

"He isn't a bit what I expected. Younger, for one thing. Oh, he's all right on the surface. Tall, quite good-looking, those grizzled bits over the ears, like a distinguished magpie—"

"But you think the magpie might be after the silver spoon?"

She laughed.

"No, not really. I'm not even sure he really *is* Humphrey Wainwright. Voices can be deceptive, and Mrs Strongitharm couldn't see him."

"Mabel could. Joyce could."

"Joyce is terrified of him. She has said from the beginning he is different from the uncle she remembers. And Mabel. I don't altogether trust her. She gives me the creeps sometimes."

"You don't seriously doubt the man's identity, do you?"

"I suppose not. All the same, Mrs Strongitharm once said—"

"What did she say?"

Fiona told him. It did not seem very important as she said it, but after thinking it over, Bill saw a possible significance. So, the next day, he went to Hanningford Police Station, and told Inspector Stewart what he had learned.

Chapter Fifteen

Joyce Morley arrived in Mr Pusey's office the morning after her visit to Fiona Goddard. When she had gone into the house with Mabel the evening before, leaving Mrs Goddard in the drive with her uncle, she had gone straight to the telephone to ring up Dr Matthews. He was reassuring. He told her that as she seemed so much better, she could go back to her ordinary life, with no restrictions on her usual activities. Joyce asked him to repeat this advice to Mabel, and handing over the receiver to the latter, who had stayed beside her, walked away, saying carelessly over her shoulder as she did so, "You'd better warn Uncle Humphrey not to interfere with me in future, Mabel. I won't allow it."

So the next morning, when Miss Morley walked downstairs in her best summer dress, and after breakfasting as usual, put on her best summer hat and her white gloves, no one asked her where she was going. She caught the ten o'clock bus at the stop in the main road, and arrived at Mr Pusey's office half an hour later.

She had not made an appointment, but she was not kept waiting very long. Mr Pusey preferred to slip her in before his next client arrived, rather than have her sit in his waiting room.

He shook hands with her, formally, moved the client's chair a little further from the desk, waited for her to sit down, and then seated himself, taking off his spectacles in the gesture, once meant to impress, but now habitual. He polished the glasses slowly, thinking that Miss Morley's present blurred appearance was infinitely preferable to the sharper vision.

"I thought I would come at once," said Miss Morley, humbly, "because I'm in such a muddle. I hope you don't mind."

"Of course not," said Mr Pusey, professionally. "How can I help you?"

"I knew you'd say that," she said, rapturously. "I knew you would. If only Mother—" She stopped, distressed, but managed to go on. "Uncle Humphrey still thinks he is going to be my guardian. I can't bear it! I can't! You must tell me what to do."

"Easy, so far," thought Mr Pusey. He put on his most reassuring manner.

"I think I may be allowed to tell you this," he said. "Your mother changed her mind. Two days before her death. I had prepared a deed and her will, but she did not sign either. Instead she gave me fresh instructions."

He paused. As Mrs Strongitharm was dead and the new deeds could not be

signed, either, he was not sure if he ought to explain them to her daughter. On the other hand, a knowledge of her mother's last wishes might influence Miss Morley in the right direction. Very cautiously he explained the new provisions, and was about to add that they, too, had not been signed, when Joyce interrupted him.

"It doesn't matter!" she cried. "It doesn't matter, now, does it? You will be my guardian, anyhow. Mabel said so, but when Uncle Humphrey insisted that he was, I wondered if she had made that up."

Her hands were clasped, her face glowing, her eyes shone upon him with a brilliance that he found very disconcerting.

"I shall be delighted to look after your business affairs, and to give you any advice you need," he said, stiffly. "You realise, I expect, that your mother's original will is the only one that is valid. The Discretionary Trust was never arranged."

"She left me all her own money, I know," said Miss Morley. "And that means Marsden and my step-father's money, too, doesn't it? All that came to Mother, as I always knew it would."

"You knew it would?"

"Oh, yes, I heard Mother and Mabel talk about it, sometimes. They never bothered whether I heard or not. No one does. They think I don't listen, but I do."

Mr Pusey thought it wiser to get back to business.

"As I have said, I shall be only too pleased to help you, in any way I can, to manage the very considerable fortune you will now inherit."

Miss Morley giggled. Mr Pusey was disagreeably shocked. She looked at him with a terrible archness, and said, "Why don't you tell me straight out, now?"

A chill swept through him. She couldn't possibly know—

He said, coldly, "I don't understand you, Miss Morley."

She was not put out; her triumph was here and now, and she rode it, proudly.

"You are only pretending," she said. "After all we've been through—together, really. Because I did help, all I could. We would have waited for Mother to go, wouldn't we? That was Mabel, because of Uncle Humphrey."

She looked at him, with the appalling tenderness he had seen once before in her face. He got up quickly.

"No," she said, holding out a hand to him. "Sit down and say it to me, gently. Or shall I say it for you?"

"Say what?" cried Mr Pusey, wondering if he ought to ring for his clerk.

"Ask me to marry you."

"*Ask you to marry me*!"

"Yes. That is what you want, isn't it? When you were certain I would have all the money."

Mr Pusey was speechless. He was still not sure what she had been talking about, for no one, *no one,* could possibly know what he had done. But she was not raving; however distorted her ideas and her interpretation of fact, some facts were there. Her suggestion revolted him, horrified him. But he had to find out what she meant, and afterwards— Afterwards he must take action, whatever it entailed.

Miss Morley's hand stretched out a little further to touch his own. He forced himself to take the hand in his and press it gently. Then he put it away from him and sat down again, the width of the desk between them, leaning back in his chair to increase the distance.

"There is some misunderstanding," he said, slowly, watching her, ready to call his clerk at the first sign of hysteria. "Will you tell me what you mean?"

She was puzzled.

"But you know. You must know. I would always do anything you wanted. I love you."

Mr Pusey felt sick. Such a confession was unimaginable, ludicrous, yet in the circumstances so bound in terror and sharp danger, that he could do nothing to repudiate it. The whole situation was impossible, and he could not think how to end it. Except by rousing her to anger or grief or both. And that he dare not do.

"Are you annoyed with me?" Joyce asked. There was a wistful sadness in her voice, but her face was sinking into the heavy lines of sullen, resentful frustration that Mr Pusey recognised as her normal expression.

"No, of course not. Only I don't understand what you mean by help. What help? When? Where?"

"In the garden," said Miss Morley, in a low voice. "In the hospital. In—in other ways, too. For ages. Always trying. You wanted money badly, didn't you? Mother told Mabel you expected something from my step-father, and when you were disappointed you would have taken it if she hadn't given you some of hers instead."

Mr Pusey's face was a curious grey colour.

"Your mother actually said all that to her maid? She must have been joking."

"No. I told you. They said everything to one another, whether I was there or not. I am sorry you were in need of money. I have always loved you."

Mr Pusey winced again, not only on Joyce's account. Her report could not be accurate: it was impossible that Mrs Strongitharm had guessed, even if she had, as she certainly had, made up to him for her husband's meanness. But it

must be true that Joyce had heard more than they intended, and had understood far more than anyone would have thought possible.

"I expect I ought to have waited," said Joyce, looking at him, thoughtfully. "You don't like me saying these things in your office, do you?" She began to draw on her white gloves. "So I'll go now."

The bell rang on Mr Pusey's desk telephone. He took up the receiver. When he put it down again, he said, "My clerk tells me my next client is downstairs. You may be interested to know it is your uncle, Mr Wainwright."

Miss Morley's face whitened.

"Uncle Humphrey to see *you*!" she whispered. "About Mother's will! It must be! He thinks he is my guardian. He thinks she signed—"

"He may do," answered Mr Pusey. "Or your mother may have told him she had changed her mind."

"I won't see him! He tried to shut me up! He would like to send me away from Marsden. I heard him say so to Mother."

It occurred to Mr Pusey that Joyce was not likely to have been present at such an interview, and he wondered how much of her information had really come to her through keyholes, half-open doors and the like. Her mother, after all, had been blind, and Mabel perhaps careless.

"You need not see him," he said. "You can go out by the side door."

His room was on a landing up a short flight of stairs from the main office and waiting room. He took Miss Morley along a passage and down a second flight of stairs to a small door. Having opened this, he held out his hand.

"Goodbye, Miss Morley."

"Joyce, now."

"I will write to you when I have any more news. I will not mention this visit of yours to your uncle."

"Will you tell him you are my guardian?"

"That agreement, as I told you, was not signed."

"But I have made you my guardian. And when you are ready to say it—" She blushed hotly. "—more than my guardian."

He shook hands with her, silently, avoiding the ardent eyes.

"You have got a secret way out of your office, haven't you?" said Joyce Morley, with sly exultation. "I thought you must have."

Mr Pusey, again speechless, watched her lumbering away up the side street to the main road and the shops.

That evening, unable to endure his anxieties and misgivings alone, Lionel Pusey went to Diana Fawcett's flat.

She was alone, but she did not seem to welcome his arrival. However, she

let him take her in his arms and kiss her, until his passion became more demanding, when she broke from him and moved away across the room. Pusey flung himself into a chair, glowering at her, but saying nothing.

Neither of them spoke for some time. It was apparent that each understood the present crisis in their affair. It had to move on or break. Neither of them wanted to be the first to speak of it.

Pusey, fresh from his extraordinary interview with Miss Morley, and remembering her unbelievable confession, was more confused than he had ever been. Only Diana could lead him out of his present nightmare, but it was quite clear that she had no intention of leading anywhere. On the contrary, she showed every sign of pulling out; had done so, in fact, for some days now. He was determined not to let her go, but he knew himself too well to be confident of success. He was not a stupid man; he had his fair share of intelligence and imagination. He was aware of this. But he was not always sure of where he was going. No one had taught him, and he had not been able to collect, on his way through life, any fixed moral standards or principles. He had nothing to oppose to Diana's complete and ruthless egoism, and he knew this, too. The knowledge sapped his will to keep her, even as he fought desperately to do so.

After a time he began to plead. He knew it was the wrong approach, but he could find no other.

"We've got to get married, Di," he began, twisting his hands together in his distress. "You've got to get a divorce."

"I don't see how I can."

"Why not? Have you ever asked for one? Have you told your husband about me?"

"Yes. He knows."

"Well, then?"

"He doesn't appear to mind."

"That's incredible. You can't stay married to a man who obviously doesn't care a rap for you."

"Perhaps he cares so much he can't bear to lose me. He'd rather share than that."

"Don't be disgusting."

"Lionel, you aren't very easy to get on with, yourself. I'm not sure I should like to be married to you. You have these rather nasty, stuffy, little conventional inhibitions and prejudices."

He dropped his head in his hands with a groan.

"I can't understand you, Di! You're so different."

"No. I'm the same as I ever was."

"Then I fell in love with an illusion."

That made her suddenly furious.

"There's no need to insult me."

"Is it an insult? Is it any worse than the things you have just thrown at me?"

She said, watching him very carefully, "Besides, I don't think it would be very wise for either of us to come before the law at present, do you? I mean, publicity and all that."

He knew what she meant, and could not but agree. It hardened his resolve.

"If you won't get a divorce and marry me, we'll have to pack it up. I can't go on seeing you like this. Bickering, arguing, all the love gone, and the happiness, and the tenderness—"

His voice broke, and he sat staring at her, utterly miserable.

She could not resist using her old power. She went to him and touched him and spoke in the voice that had never failed. But it failed now. She had gone too far from him. He took her hand and held it, but he said, quite coldly, very unemotionally, "Apart from anything else, I can't afford this flat any longer. I can't afford to go on keeping you in a separate establishment."

She tore her hand away and struck him in the face, and the next instant he was on his feet, gripping her by the shoulders, staring into her eyes, filled with rage, and the hatred of love gone sour.

She struggled to free herself, but he held her, exulting in his man's power to curb her movements, if he could not subdue her will. They swayed as she struggled, moving slowly away from the sofa. A small table in their path went down, and with it a brown paper parcel. Lionel put out his foot to kick the table away, trod on the parcel, and heard the crunch of breaking glass.

Diana's cry, an altered cry, of anger mixed now with fear, made him drop his hands. She reeled back, falling against a chair, clutched it, and regained her balance.

"Don't touch it!" she ordered.

He bent to look down at the mess. A black fluid had burst out of the broken bottle. It flowed over the brown paper and on to the floor.

"What is it?" he asked, in his normal voice. This odd liquid had drowned his rage. He stooped again, gingerly moving the paper from the glass and picking up fragments of the bottle.

"Leave it alone! Don't touch it!" Diana cried again.

Her voice was so urgent and so strange that he paused, considering it. She was white-faced and tense, but as he looked at her his astonishment flooded her cheeks with scarlet.

"Leave it alone," she repeated, trying to master her voice. "I'll get a cloth and a dustpan. You'll cut yourself."

She left the room and Pusey, disregarding her orders, bent again over the

fragments. He gathered them up, and presently came on the label. It told him all he wanted to know, and more, much more. He took the piece of glass with the label attached, wrapped it in an unstained bit of the brown wrapping paper, and put it in his pocket. When Diana came back into the room he was standing upright, waiting for her.

"Hair dye," he said, with a little smile. "Black hair dye. How long have you had to use it, darling?"

She glanced at him, and away, not answering.

"How old are you, really, Diana? I have often wondered. Is your hair, your real, unvarnished hair, grey in streaks, or white all over? You have it cut so beautifully, in the latest young woman's style. It suits you, too; such a glorious dark frame for your lovely face."

"Stop!" she cried.

"No. I suppose I ought to have guessed. But you never had these bottles lying about, did you? On your dressing table, or in the bathroom? Where I could see them. I don't mind. Why should I? It's all of a piece with your excessive make-up. I have said sometimes, you may remember, that you overdo that. Your female competitors in Hanningford resent it a good deal, I've heard. But I see now where it fits in. You need it to make the thing complete. False hair, false complexion, phoney character altogether."

She took a step towards him, hands clenched.

"Get out!" she told him.

He looked at her, perfectly calm now, not feeling anything at all. How ugly she is when she's angry, he thought, without bitterness, just stating a fact to himself.

"Yes, I'll go," he said, quietly. "I'm sorry I broke the bottle. How much did it cost? Shall I buy you another?"

"Get out!"

He moved to the door. He felt tired, but oddly relieved. There would be things to do now; all practical things that he understood; simple, worldly things, over which he would not flounder.

"Goodbye," he said, and added, with deplorable triteness, "Thanks for everything."

Lionel Pusey went back to his own home. The cathartic effect of his last encounter with Diana, which he knew was indeed the very last, sustained him throughout the rest of the evening.

But in the middle of the night he woke up; woke completely, his mind filled with uncomfortable images. The crushed parcel was a recurring theme. He saw again and again the broken stained label, with the name of a well-known London hairdresser. Why London? And why the home treatment? He

imagined that women of Diana's sort would make constant visits to a local hairdresser. Not so, apparently, his late mistress. Or did she have her hair attended to locally, except for the dyeing? No, that was silly. Of course any hairdresser would know it was dyed, and would probably have to dip it when she was shampooed. Pusey gave up. He knew none of the details of female hairdressing.

He asked himself instead another question, and in the early hours of the new day he asked it with a certain dread. Why exactly, did Diana Fawcett dye her hair? Pure vanity? Or disguise? Disguise. He pulled himself up. With what object? What possible object? There was only one answer to that, and it was a contradictory one. For dyed hair attracted attention. Her appearance had attracted him. He had fallen easily, eagerly; she had taken as much as she wanted from him, and now it was over. He had been mad—mad.

Twisting and turning in his bed Lionel Pusey knew that the consequences of this madness were not over, were in fact all in the future, and steadily approaching. He knew, too, that there was nothing whatever he could do to avoid them.

And then he remembered Joyce Morley. He had gone to Diana the evening before hoping to be able to confide in her his preposterous interview with Miss Morley. He had even hoped to amuse her in the telling. It had not worked out that way. In the bitterness of their quarrel and its closing scene he had quite forgotten Miss Morley. But as he remembered her now, he saw another and perhaps more menacing complication than all the rest.

Joyce Morley had made herself perfectly clear. It was a crazy, repulsive suggestion, or offer, but there it was. She wanted to marry him. She even seemed to imagine that he wanted to marry her. He shuddered when he remembered her appalling archness as she went away, and considered what this could mean. Was it possible that she intended to blackmail him into making her his wife? There had been a hint of compulsion. Nothing more. But it might be significant. Of course she could prove nothing. Or could she? He had to acknowledge that he did not know.

As the first light of the morning came slowly into his bedroom, turning the black emptiness around him into a collection of familiar furniture, Lionel Pusey grew calmer. His only chance was to be practical, helpful, frank and honest. That was the line. Other people had done suspicious things, and he had noticed them. He had even become involved in them, but not, of course, criminally. He thought he saw how he could successfully confuse several issues, and he bent his mind, more hopefully, to perfecting this idea.

Before he went to his office that morning, he visited Hanningford Police Station and gave Inspector Stewart the label on the broken glass in the piece of brown paper.

“This Strongitharm case is really coming along now,” the Inspector told Sergeant Forrest that afternoon. He repeated the latest information, from Bill Goddard and from Lionel Pusey.

“She dyes her hair?” said Forrest. “It’s all in character, isn’t it? Haven’t we got quite a case against her, now? She and Pusey working it together, money motive, Pusey getting cold feet and coming to you to clear himself in advance. After all, that car of hers—”

“That car,” said Inspector Stewart, “is the most interesting thing of all, up to date. I now know that it wasn’t Mrs Fawcett’s at all.”

“Whose was it?”

”The registration is in the name of Wainwright.”

Sergeant Forrest whistled his astonishment.

”Wainwright? Mrs Strongitharm’s brother? But he was miles away.”

”Yes, he was. And I’ve checked that. When the car was in the stable yard he was miles away. Think again. It’s really quite simple.”

Chapter Sixteen

For three days, three summer days of cloudless sky and burning sun, life at Marsden House went on as usual. Mr Wainwright was still there. He had had several grave talks with Mabel; or rather, monologues, for the tall maid spoke very little on any of these occasions, and then only to press Dr Matthews's opinion of Miss Morley's state of mind. The latter, she affirmed over and over again, was quite capable of looking after herself and her affairs, provided she was under a good influence. The specialist in London had often told Mrs Strongitharm this, and Dr Matthews supported it. Mabel implied, very plainly, that the necessary influence was to be found in her own person. She also hinted that Miss Morley was inclined to form unsuitable attachments. Mr Wainwright pressed her to disclose more details of this, but was given very vague answers. He warned Mabel, however, on each occasion, that he intended to place Joyce in a suitable institution for the mentally afflicted. To which she answered every time that he could only do this if the doctors were willing to certify her, and she was perfectly sure they never would.

She did not remind him that he had no power to dispose of Miss Morley, certified or otherwise. Nor did Mr Wainwright explain to Mabel that Mr Pusey had broken to him the news of his sister's change of mind. Their battle of wills was conducted most politely, with proper respect on both sides.

These exchanges did not come to the ears of Miss Morley. She spent the three days mostly in the garden of Marsden House, engaged in long blissful daydreams about Mr Pusey, and in recollecting her last conversation with him. She admired his caution and secrecy as much as she admired everything about him. She telephoned to him, once, at his private address, but he was out. She decided to be patient. He would have to visit her, or ask her to visit him, when she was made legal mistress of Marsden House and all her mother's money. She was not at all sure what formalities would be necessary, but Mr Pusey knew, and she trusted him completely.

Meanwhile Inspector Stewart, following several lines of investigation, had completed his case and was preparing to make an arrest. The whole thing was clear in his own mind, and he thought he had sufficient proof. But the defence would be a strong one, and likely to sway a jury for emotional reasons. Reluctantly, and rather sheepishly, he told Sergeant Forrest that he could think of no better way of clearing up this difficulty than getting the parties together and testing their reactions.

Sergeant Forrest grinned.

"I bet you'll not get a confession," he said. "They don't lose their heads in real life. Not the hardened ones."

"But they do slip up," retorted Inspector Stewart. "Anyway, it's worth trying, to make sure of a conviction."

So, on the follwing morning, an excited Jean admitted to the library at Marsden House a stream of ill-assorted visitors, each of whose arrival astonished her more than the last.

"It's a showdown," she said to Rose, after taking Fiona Goddard to join those already assembled. "They're going to make her own up what she's done."

"Is Mabel with her?" asked Rose, compassionate as always.

"Yes, and Mrs Goddard, that's so friendly with her. I've just taken her in."

"There's the bell again," said Rose.

"I wonder who it is this time."

"You'd better go and see."

The next visitor, who proved to be the last, was in Jean's eyes the most exciting of all. Mrs Fawcett, impeccably dressed, her face more mask-like than ever, not a hair out of place, announced that Miss Morley had asked to see her.

"She'll get the shock of her life," Jean gloated, "when she walks into that room and finds them all sitting round, like a set of deaf-mutes, with their eyes glued on them two coppers."

"I wonder what she knows," said Rose, thoughtfully.

Fiona Goddard was thinking the same thing as she watched Mrs Fawcett step into the room, stop dead just inside the door, and then move forward again slowly.

"Good morning, madam," said Inspector Stewart, politely. "Will you take a seat, please?"

"What is all this?" asked Mrs Fawcett, scornfully, not looking at the chair that Sergeant Forrest had placed for her.

"If you will kindly sit down, I will begin to explain," said the Inspector, still in the same polite voice. Reluctantly Mrs Fawcett did so. She nodded to Fiona and ignored everyone else in the room.

"What is *she* doing here?" asked Miss Morley, in her loud aggressive voice. "I don't want her in my house. I don't like her."

Mabel and Fiona whispered reassurances: the Inspector did not answer the question. Mr Pusey, who was sitting on the other side of Mabel, moved his chair a little further off and looked very miserable indeed. He was shockingly changed, Fiona thought. He had never been much to look at, but at least he had dressed neatly and given the impression of being an alert man of affairs. Now, with his pallor and his twitching features, and the general sagging of his

body as he sat, she thought he must be ill, and might collapse at any moment.

Joyce did not seem to have noticed any difference in him. She occasionally threw adoring glances in his direction and did not seem to mind that he avoided looking at her.

A uniformed constable, whose presence had not been noticed by the visitors as they came in, now put his head round the door and asked, "Anyone else, sir?"

"No," answered Inspector Stewart. "I shall start now."

"Very good, sir."

The constable withdrew, closing the door after him.

"Start what, for heaven's sake?" asked Mrs Fawcett, petulantly. "I've shopping to do."

"And I have patients to attend to," Dr Matthews snapped, from the other side of the room. "Which is rather more important. So I suggest we listen to what the Inspector has to say, without wasting time on pointless questions."

Mrs Fawcett gasped, reddened, opened her mouth to attack, but thought better of it.

"Thank you, sir," said Stewart. He went on, "I won't beat about the bush. All of you here have been in some way connected with a series of three deaths in the family belonging to this house. One of those deaths was an easily proved murder. I refer, of course, to Mr Hilary Strongitharm. His brother's death, less clearly, but no less certainly, was murder. Their step-mother, Mrs Strongitharm, died by a fall downstairs in highly suspicious circumstances. We have reason to believe that her death was also brought about deliberately."

Nobody moved, nobody spoke. Everyone looked straight ahead, avoiding the eyes of the others. Except Miss Morley, whose gaze turned once more in Mr Pusey's direction and rested there, lost in tender contemplation.

"A case can be built up," said Inspector Stewart, "against one person here in this room. A very full and convincing case. I shall now proceed to enumerate in detail what we know about the actions of this person."

Still no one moved, and Miss Morley continued to stare lovingly at the back of Mr Pusey's head.

"When three people in the same family meet their death by violence," went on the Inspector, "it is natural to look about for another member of the family who is likely to benefit from their removal. You all know how matters stood here with regard to inheritance. Oh, yes, you did, Mrs Fawcett. Mr Pusey discussed the subject with you on several occasions. It was not what would normally be expected of a solicitor, but Mr Pusey's relations with you were not—shall we say, normal for a solicitor, either."

"How dare you!" said Mrs Fawcett, furiously. "I shall take a case against you for defamation of character."

"I advise you not to," said Stewart, coolly, "seeing it was Mr Pusey himself gave me the information."

She rounded on her former lover.

"You little rat!"

"No," said Joyce Morley, "you are not to call him names. You are a vile, wicked woman. I have always hated you."

"Hush, Joyce," urged Fiona. "Don't say anything."

Mabel put an arm round her charge. After a few seconds Joyce subsided, and sat, staring now at the floor, a puzzled frown on her face, and her mouth a little open.

"To resume," said Stewart, in his official voice. "You all knew that Mrs Strongitharm would inherit if her step-sons predeceased her. And you all knew that Miss Morley was the old lady's heir. Therefore, on the face of it, the natural thing was to investigate the actions of Miss Morley. The results of this were very startling. I shall now tell you what we found."

He paused, but no one spoke and Joyce continued to look at the floor.

"To begin with the first murder. We find that Miss Morley was about in the gardens a good deal on that day, as her custom is. We find that she was certainly in the kitchen garden about an hour before Hugh Strongitharm was found unconscious in the greenhouse. We know that she took a ladder from the tool shed, and removed a bundle of rags and paper from the flue of the greenhouse stove, substituting a magpie's nest that was in the shed, and belonged to the gardener's grandson. We know that she put the rags and paper in the garden incinerator, but did not open it up to burn them quickly. We found enough left to prove that they came from this house. One piece of material was identified as part of a former dress belonging to Miss Thorne, Mrs Strongitharm's personal maid."

"You killed Hugh?" cried Joyce, shrinking away from Mabel. "Then you *did* push Mother! You did! I always said you did!"

"Joyce! Joyce!" whispered Fiona again, and Dr Matthews half rose from his chair.

But Miss Morley grew quiet again, only this time it was Fiona who put an arm round her. Mabel sat, rigid and expressionless, with her eyes on Inspector Stewart.

"After Hugh Strongitharm's death and while his brother was still at the hospital Miss Morley prepared and sent off two notices for the Deaths columns of two daily papers. She stole the money to pay for these insertions from her mother's wallet. Miss Thorne thought she had taken it, but was not sure it might not have been Mrs Fawcett, who also had access to the old lady's handbag."

"Well, I'm damned!" burst out Diana. "You slandering old bitch!"

"It might have been Mabel," said Joyce Morley. "I told Mother so, when she asked me."

"It was you, Miss Morley," said Inspector Stewart, turning towards her. "And you got Constable Plum's little girl to buy the postal orders for you. We know all about it, you see. We know you were at the hospital when Hilary Strongitharm was suffocated. We know he did not die of heart disease and the shock of reading the newspaper. He was suffocated. But you wanted him to die of heart failure. We know you wanted him to die, because you changed his real pills for aspirin, long before, knowing that it was dangerous. We have traced your purchase of aspirin, and we have found powdered aspirin in your room, left there on your nail file when you filed down the pills to the size of the right ones. When Hilary was dead you lifted him and put his pillow back under his head, with the stained side underneath. Hidden, as you thought. We found some dried saliva, a little blood, and some grains of shaving talc on the gloves you wore that morning. Do not try to deny all this, Miss Morley. We have the proof."

She did not deny it. It was doubtful if she had heard anything he said.

"So we come to the third death," said Inspector Stewart. "Mrs Strongitharm's fall. Now why was this old lady, blind and infirm, out on the stairs in the middle of the night? Because she thought the house was on fire. And why? Because someone, knowing she was blind, had lit a smoky fire in her grate, again with a bundle of rags and paper. Was this fire meant to burn her in her room? Then why was it in the grate and not under her bed? Or was it meant to smoke her out? Bring her on to the landing, where in the confusion of a fire alarm she could be given the fatal push? That was how it was done. There were only three people in this house that night, unless a fourth came in from outside. The three were Mr Wainwright, Mrs Strongitharm's brother, Miss Thorne, her maid, and Miss Morley. Mr Wainwright says he was woken by his sister's scream as she fell. Miss Thorne says she was woken by the smell of smoke and a noise on the landing below her room. Miss Morley says she was awakened by the smell of burning and found her mother on the landing."

"Mother held on to me," said Joyce, faintly. "I tried to save her. I did."

"Miss Morley did not put on the landing light," went on the Inspector. "Miss Thorne did that when she arrived. But Mrs Strongitharm had then just fallen. Mr Wainwright found a piece of his sister's nightdress in Miss Morley's hand. He very rightly handed it over to me."

"I tried to hold her!" cried Joyce again. "You don't believe me, but I did. Mabel pushed her."

All of the eyes in the room turned in the direction of Mabel Thorne, sitting so stiff and quiet beside Miss Morley. All of those present began to speculate on a new possibility; all, that is, except the police and one other.

It was Mr Pusey who broke the silence.

“As your legal adviser, Miss Morley,” he said, in a cold, precise voice, “I must tell you not to make statements of any kind now. I would advise you not to answer questions at this present time.”

“Why not?” asked Joyce.

“In your own interest,” said Mr Pusey. “I am sure you have understood what the inspector has been hinting at.”

“But I haven’t done anything!” she cried. “At least, only to help. I mean —”

“I do beg you,” Mr Pusey interrupted her, “not to say any more. I assure you that your defence depends on it.”

“My defence?”

Joyce looked round the room, meeting pair after pair of stony eyes. She turned to Fiona, and even here, in spite of a gentle compassion, she saw reluctance and a shrinking from sympathy.

“You are all against me!” she wailed. “All except Lionel. And he hasn’t even said—”

Mr Pusey half rose from his chair. His face wore a greyish tinge and his hands trembled, but his voice was quite steady. He appealed to Dr Matthews.

“My client is your patient, doctor,” he said. “Can we not insist for health reasons that this interview must come to an end? At any rate for Miss Morley herself.”

Dr Matthews’s response was unexpected.

“I think Miss Morley should be given a further chance to explain her actions,” he said. “I think that would be the best thing for her. It would relieve her mind and get rid of the present confusion.”

“Can she explain?” asked Mr Pusey, with a deliberate sidelong glance at Inspector Stewart.

“Miss Morley,” said Dr Matthews, “do you understand that Inspector Stewart has found so much evidence against you that he may have to charge you with the murder of your step-brothers and your mother?”

Joyce sat, open-mouthed, looking from the doctor to Mr Pusey and back again.

“She doesn’t understand a word of it,” said the lawyer, firmly and brutally.

Miss Morley’s eyes filled with tears.

“You oughtn’t to speak like that to me,” she whispered. “You know I can’t say anything. You know why. You ought to tell them that you and I—that we are—”

Her voice sank to a whisper, and only Mabel and Fiona heard the final word, that ended in a sob.

“I am your family solicitor,” repeated Mr Pusey, desperately, ”and nothing

more. I have never been anything to any one of your family other than their legal adviser. There has been no reason for any other contact. There never could be, and there never will be."

Joyce Morley rose to her feet, weeping loudly. Through her tears and loud sobbing they heard her voice, in confused, almost incoherent speech.

"It's because he's frightened. I know I was right. I've been right all along. I had to help and I did help. You think you know everything, but you don't. I'll never tell you anything. You can put it all on me, and I'll never tell you anything. But he mustn't say there was nothing between us. There was. There was. I know there was!"

Dr Matthews was at her side now, a restraining hand on her arm. He looked across at Stewart.

"I don't think you need Miss Morley any longer, do you, Inspector?"

The Inspector, looking very uncomfortable, shook his head.

With Mabel at Miss Morley's other side and Dr Matthews helping her along, the distraught creature moved towards the door. Fiona Goddard hesitated, and then got up to follow.

"If you don't mind," said Inspector Stewart, "I would rather you stayed here."

A little ripple of surprise, or was it suspense, went through the gathering, but no one spoke until Dr Matthews came back into the room, and the constable at the door closed it after him.

Then Mr Wainwright said, in a voice expressing serious concern, "The case agajnst my poor niece is complete, I suppose. But surely she will be unfit to plead?"

Inspector Stewart lifted his head to look in turn at Mr Pusey, Mrs Fawcett and the questioner.

"Miss Morley," he said, quietly, "will not be asked to plead."

Chapter Seventeen

Nobody spoke, nobody moved. After a short silence, during which Inspector Stewart looked from one to another of the strained, set faces in the room, he began again.

"Miss Morley, as you have heard, performed several mischievous acts, but only one of them was of a criminal nature, though her intention towards both her step-brothers, at least, was criminal. However, she failed, or shall we say, she was forestalled. Her criminal attempt with aspirin was chancey in any case, and Mr Goddard has assured me that at the time of his death Hilary Strongitharm was recovering from his haemorrhage. Miss Morley's actions, however irresponsible, however evilly meant, did nothing to bring about the deaths of her step-brothers. Her real motive was simply to help the person she imagined was guilty."

"You!" cried Diana Fawcett, suddenly turning to Lionel Pusey. "Because, believe it or not, she has a pash on you!"

She began to laugh; a harsh, cruel sound, that brought all the eyes in the room to her raddled face. All except Pusey's, who sat bowed in his chair, immovable since Miss Morley's outburst, his face hidden.

"Why did you encourage her?" went on the cruel voice, stabbing at him. "No wonder she was ready to eat out of your hand. But, of course. You knew she would be an heiress when the brothers were out of the way. That was the motive, wasn't it? Their money. It was a pity you didn't keep her under better control, wasn't it? She rather mucked up your little schemes. Her efforts to help only made the murders more obvious, didn't they?"

Still Mr Pusey did not raise his head or make a sound, and Diana turned impatiently to the Inspector.

"Why don't you get on with your job?" she asked. "Then we can all go."

Inspector Stewart looked at her.

"If you've finished, madam, I can certainly get on with what I was saying," he suggested, calmly. "There were three main lines of inquiry in this case, one for each death. First, who put the bundle of paper and rags in the greenhouse flue? Second, who impersonated the male nurse at the hospital? And third, who pushed Mrs Strongitharm downstairs in this house? There is, of course, a presumption that the same murderer was at work in each case, but it has to be proved. You, madam," he said, to Mrs Fawcett, "seem to be accusing Mr Pusey. I suppose you consider yourself to be in a position to have an intimate

knowledge of his actions?"

Diana Fawcett glared at him, but she nodded agreement.

"I do. And I think he had every opportunity to put the bundle in the flue."

"From the point of view of time, yes. It could have been done in his lunch hour. The impersonation is a different matter. Mr Pusey rang up the hospital from his office at about the time the murder was committed. How do you suggest that was done?"

"A tape-recording," said Diana, breathing fast. "He could have gone out by his back stairs and the side door."

"I see you know his office as well as you do his home. Yes, I am aware of the back stairs and the side door. But a tape-recording would have to be manipulated. The call would have to be made by someone, and the recording started. And how conduct a whole conversation? Or are you suggesting that Mr Pusey had an accomplice? If so, whom? The clerk at his office? Or you, for instance?"

"How dare you?"

"No one asked you to accuse Mr Pusey, madam. You have only yourself to blame. Now I will tell you why I have never supposed the impersonation to have been made by him. In the first place he is nearly bald on the top of his head, and neither Sister Wright nor the hospital barber would have thought it was Barker if they had seen such a head above the gauze mask. Particularly the barber, who is professionally observant of hair. But in addition to that, Mr Pusey is short-sighted, very short-sighted. He would not have been able to enter that ward without his spectacles, far less find Mr Strongitharm's room and commit a murder there. And Barker does not wear spectacles. No. Mr Pusey cannot be accused of killing either of the brothers. Nor, for that matter, Mrs Strongitharm herself."

At this point the constable outside the room opened the door again to let in Mabel Thorne. She walked quietly back to her former chair and sat down.

"Miss Morley is all right, I hope," the Inspector asked, in a kindly voice.

"Yes, thank you, sir. Rose and Jean are with her."

"Then I can go on." He looked round the room. "You may wonder that Mr Pusey could be considered at all in connection with the old lady's death, since he does not live in this house. But he was in charge of all matters arising from the brothers' deaths, and on account of Mrs Strongitharm's blindness he had the job of arranging and disposing of their personal possessions. He had their keys. He could have let himself into the house any time he wished."

"That's what he did, then!" exclaimed Diana. "That's what he did, and lit the fire in her room, and then pushed her downstairs."

"You are strangely intent on proving Pusey's guilt," said Dr Matthews. "Why are you so angry with him? Because of what poor Miss Morley

imagined? It was a pure delusion, you know."

"Nobody asked you to interfere," said Mrs Fawcett, rudely.

"It was in your own interest," said Dr Matthews. "You must be aware that Sergeant Forrest is taking a note of what we are all saying."

She stiffened at that, but was not checked.

"He deceived me," she said, bitterly. "Can't you understand?"

There was a cold anger in Inspector Stewart's eyes as he began again.

"There has been a great deal of deception in this case," he said, "from more quarters than one. But I may as well tell you that Mr Pusey had no motive for killing Mrs Strongitharm. On the contrary, he had every reason to wish her to live. On the night of her death he was at work on a new will she was making, in which he stood to benefit greatly. A Trust was to be established which would have given him complete control of Miss Morley's income. Besides that, he would have received a substantial legacy."

Mr Wainwright started up from his chair.

"Well, I'm damned!" he said. "I thought there was something fishy when Dorothy said I might as well go home." He turned to the Inspector. "I'd have you know," he said, "it was I who was to be Joyce's guardian. I was going to work this Trust, and have a legacy for taking it on."

Mr Pusey raised his head for the first time since Joyce had left the room.

"You were going to get a legacy," he said, "in the new will. But it was never signed."

Inspector Stewart said, "Not only did Mr Pusey have no motive, but neither did Miss Morley, nor Miss Thorne. The old lady told her maid about her change of plan, and Miss Thorne told Miss Morley, who was delighted with the news."

"So everyone knew except me," said Mr Wainwright, with a grim smile. "I still believed in my own advantages."

The Inspector ignored this.

"So far," he said, "I have presented you with the negative evidence. I propose now to give you a few facts of a positive nature. Mrs Fawcett," he said, turning on her a look so stern that she instinctively braced herself against the back of her chair. "You were very glib just now explaining to me why you thought your former—friend—was the guilty one. Perhaps you would like to give your attention to a few facts I will mention. First, we have reason to believe the car you drive was standing in the stable yard here on the afternoon of the day Hugh Strongitharm died."

If she was startled, she did not show it. Her face was very pale, but she answered at once.

"That afternoon I was having my hair shampooed and set. You can ask my hairdresser."

"I have done so. That is true. Have you any reason to suppose that the car was used that afternoon by someone else?"

Now she was shaken. It showed in her lips and her stiffened fingers.

"No."

"Nevertheless, the car was here and we can prove it. Now, to return to your hairdresser. We know, Mrs Fawcett, that you dye your hair."

"Damn you! What has that got to do with you?"

Her face was scarlet with rage and mortification; she leaped to her feet.

"I'm not going to stay here to be insulted!" she cried, making for the door.

But Sergeant Forrest had moved before she did, and stood in front of it, facing her.

"Sit down," said Inspector Stewart. "You can't help yourself by acting that way."

She moved back to her chair and sat down slowly. The atmosphere in the room had changed. Glancing round she saw Fiona Goddard's face of horror, and Mabel, pale, breathing hard. Dr Matthews returned her look, but she found no comfort there. Lionel Pusey had again buried his face in his hands. Mr Wainwright was looking out of the window.

"You dye your hair," resumed the Inspector, quite as if there had been no interruption at all. "You buy this particular dye in London, and take it to your hairdresser here. I believe you use it yourself at home as well."

"What of it?" asked Diana, defiantly, recovering her nerve.

"Only that, without it, your hair would be grey, quite suitable for a woman of fifty-three. With it, your hair is the colour of Nurse Barker's."

Her terror was now obvious. Mr Pusey, who had looked up once, when her real age was mentioned, and then looked down again, now spoke.

"Charge her if you have to," he said, hoarsely. "But stop torturing her!"

Inspector Stewart disregarded him.

"A hospital gown and mask would have concealed the fact that you are a woman," he said. "But that is immaterial. You were not at the hospital that morning. You were reading the newspaper to Mrs Strongitharm."

Mrs Fawcett leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes. Mr Wainwright looked shocked.

"Surely, Inspector," he said. "This is a bit too like third degree?"

"Hear, hear!" said Fiona, warmly.

Inspector Stewart went on, in the same flat voice.

"You could have obtained possession of a key to this house. Do you confirm that, Miss Thorne?"

Mabel drew herself up.

"Yes, I do," she said. "She was always poking about Mrs Strongitharm's drawers and that. I caught her at it more than once. Looking for the spare key, I wouldn't be at all surprised."

"Thank you," said the Inspector. "That is all I want. Now, Mrs Fawcett, you may as well know that an examination of Mrs Strongitharm, after death, showed, amongst other things, the presence under several of her finger nails of black hairs."

"Hairs?" said Diana, faintly.

"Yes, madam. Black hairs. Dyed with the same dye you use."

"How do you know? My hairdresser doesn't get it for me. I never tell her what it is."

"I know that. You get it in London. Mr Pusey brought us the label, attached to a stained fragment of the bottle he broke at your flat. The flat he provided for you."

Mrs Fawcett suddenly collapsed, or appeared to do so. But when Dr Matthews went forward and tried to feel her pulse, she beat him off with both hands, cursing him first, and then rounding on Lionel Pusey with a torrent of reproach and abuse.

"That will do," said the Inspector, quite unmoved by the display he had expected. "I have not accused you of anything yet, have I?"

"You'd better not! I wasn't here that night! I can prove it! Lionel can prove it, too!"

It was spoken with every intention of malice, but it misfired.

"No, he can't," said Stewart. "Not on that occasion. You have not seen him since the day the hair dye bottle was broken. But it does not matter. You were never more nor less than an accessory. Never more than the tool—the willing tool, though—of your husband."

They all stirred, and Fiona thought, frivolously, "The missing Mr Fawcett. At last!" Then, feeling ashamed of herself, bit her lip, though she had not spoken.

"Your husband, Humphrey Wainwright," said the Inspector, smoothly.

Dr Matthews sighed.

"I was right, then," he said, sadly, making a statement, not asking a question.

Mr Wainwright did not say anything. He was looking at the nails of one hand, and seemed to be far away from the room and the people in it.

"Humphrey!" Diana said, in a quick terrified whisper. He took no notice.

"The hair under Mrs Strongitharm's nails was dyed black," repeated Stewart, gravely, "with Mrs Fawcett's dye. But it was not her hair, which is perfectly straight, unless permed. It was Mr Wainwright's hair, which is curly."

Humphrey Wainwright looked up and smiled.

"How do you know?" he asked.

"Hairs from your comb match with those found," Stewart answered, irritably. "You should have waited until it grew out again, but you were too greedy. Naturally Miss Thorne noticed the change, and Miss Morley, too. You had white hair when they saw you last, seven years ago. Even Mrs Goddard thought your appearance strange when she first met you, because Mrs Strongitharm had told her the family hair went grey or white early in life, as a rule, and that you looked older than your age. That is so, isn't it, Mrs Goddard?"

"Yes," said Fiona, in a low voice.

Humphrey looked at her and smiled again, then returned to the inspection of his nails.

Inspector Stewart went on, "The car that Mrs Fawcett has been using all the time she has lived in Hanningford is Mr Wainwright's car. After we found out about the car being at Marsden in the stable yard, it was easy to discover its real ownership. The car's mileage was then checked at regular intervals, and it was looked out for along the route to Mr Wainwright's home. We were able to obtain evidence of Mrs Wainwright's most recent visit to him. Her real identity was then established. She, in fact, did all the scouting and most of the dirty work. She was at her hairdresser's when Hugh Strongitharm died, but she had been to Marsden earlier to put the bundle in the flue, and she went again later to get it out. Only Miss Morley forestalled her. Mrs Wainwright went to the hospital when Hilary was admitted and saw Nurse Barker. She got hold of the gown and mask, and I expect it was her suggestion that Mr Wainwright should use her hair dye. She kept him posted all along. She came to Hanningford for that purpose. She made friends with Mr Pusey for that purpose."

"Only you went a bit further than I intended there, Phillipa, my pet," said Mr Wainwright. "But never mind, girls will be girls, and bad girls will be—"

She glared at him, not speaking.

"My poor wife went further than I intended at every stage," said Mr Wainwright. "Excess of zeal in our search for cash. But surely, Inspector, you don't imagine I would push my own sister downstairs to her death? Why should I? I believed at that time that she was just about to hand me over a reasonable sum in exchange for looking after Joyce. Not to mention the Discretionary Trust. Which I could have manipulated in my own interest."

"That is not true," said the Inspector. "Mr Pusey informed Mrs Fawcett, I mean Mrs Wainwright, of the old lady's change of plan. You heard it the same evening."

Wainwright laughed gently.

"Well, suppose I did. You still can't prove that I shoved Dorothy

downstairs. Or that she died of the fall, for that matter. Her heart was weak and I expect she died of shock. There were no bones broken."

"On the contrary," said Dr Matthews. "Both the hyoid bones were broken."

Wainwright turned to look at the doctor.

"That was not said at the inquest."

"The inquest, may I remind you, was adjourned."

Once more, there was silence in the room. Then Wainwright laughed again.

"It's fantastic!" he said. "All this twaddle about my hair and so on. I admit I was there on the landing. I admit I took part in the struggle. What can you prove from that? Nothing. Joyce was left with a bit of Dorothy's nightdress, and you found my hair under her finger nails. Does that show which of us pushed her? Does it even show which of us meant to push which? Perhaps she just fell, without anyone pushing. Perhaps Joyce wanted to get rid of me? Or perhaps I wanted to get rid of Joyce? You can never prove that anyone deliberately pushed my sister downstairs."

"But we can prove who strangled her," said Dr Matthews.

Humphrey Wainwright's face went blank. His eyes moved away from the doctor's to stare at Inspector Stewart. The latter nodded.

"You have just heard that the hyoid bones in the throat were broken," he said. "She was a big woman, with a lot of loose skin about the neck. It did not show any external bruising to speak of. She was probably dead, though, or nearly so, when she fell."

"Nonsense," said Wainwright, recovering his voice. "Absolute bilge. She screamed when she fell. So she was certainly alive then. I heard her. Joyce heard her. Mabel here heard her."

"No, I didn't," said Mabel, stiffly.

She was sitting erect, looking straight ahead of her. Fiona shivered, for the cold correct voice held a note of unquenchable hatred.

"Tell him," said Inspector Stewart.

"It was me that screamed," said Mabel, "when I saw you throttling Mrs Strongitharm."

Chapter Eighteen

Bill Goddard, coming home late that evening, found Fiona in tears. The ordeal at Marsden House had been too much for her.

"I don't know why they wanted me there at all," she sobbed. "Not at the end, anyway. It was horrible. I can still hear that ghastly woman screeching as they took her away. He didn't turn a hair. Still seemed to think they had no case against him."

"They had a case. A good one. I've been talking to Matthews. Wainwright is a bad egg; he appears to have had previous convictions for fraud. Mabel will stick to her guns; she was devoted to the old girl and the balmy daughter. She'll be all out to prove him guilty."

"Didn't Mrs Strongitharm know about her brother?"

"Apparently not. He saw her so little."

"Mabel is a formidable character. She didn't like me."

"A bit jealous, I expect. Or afraid Joyce would give herself away to you, and you'd take action."

"Thank God she didn't. Joyce, I mean. Except about being in love with Mr Pusey. What will happen to him?"

"Nothing. Why should it? He gave the police a splendid bit of evidence. I don't mind betting he's been milking the Marsden estate a bit, to pay for Mrs Fawcett. But the police are not going to haul him in for that. Not after the way he's helped them. And who else is likely to? Not Joyce. He could swipe the whole fortune if he brought himself to marry her."

"Don't!"

Fiona's tears began to flow again and Bill comforted her.

"That poor creature," she said, presently, drying her eyes. "Isn't it queer that she was convinced, long before the Wainwrights started to murder the twins, that Mr Pusey was in money difficulties? So sure of it she made up ways of helping him. She was right, you see. It's rather uncanny."

"We have no real proof she was right. I was only speculating."

"No. You should have seen Pusey. Nothing else explains his behaviour today. He was scared almost senseless, and ashamed as well, and appalled to learn the truth about Diana."

"Lucky, in a way, Joyce did what she did. Started the ball rolling! If she hadn't made Hilary ill with the aspirin both the brothers would have died in

the greenhouse, the bundle in the flue would have been taken out by Mrs Fawcett, who was somewhere in the garden waiting to do it, and everyone would have been foxed."

"Would they have thought the deaths were natural?"

"Hardly. Carbon monoxide poisoning is not a natural cause. But it would have foxed them. Even the astute Dr Matthews. As it was, that enterprising pair had to improvise in constantly changing circumstances. Always the most difficult thing to do. They fell down on it, of course."

"Poor Joyce," Fiona said again. "What will become of her now?"

"I imagine she'll be certified and retired to a place of safety."

"Oh, no!"

"Difficult for them to do anything else. She had some pretty lethal ideas, one way or another, didn't she? Personally, I think she ought to be decorated for showing up that cold-blooded pair of tigers. But I doubt if the authorities will look at it that way."

No one, except the Goddards, looked at it that way. Dr Matthews got in touch with the London specialist, who went down to Farthing-on-Hone, saw Joyce, and decided that she could no longer be allowed to count as a normal responsible person. Dr Matthews undertook to arrange for certification, and the control of Miss Morley's property by the Commissioners in Lunacy.

Hearing this, Mr Pusey threw in his hand. He was ruined, anyway. The scandal of his relations with Mrs Wainwright, which was bound to break over his head on her first appearance in the magistrate's court, would finish his practice in Hanningford. He decided that he might as well declare his embezzlements before Joyce Morley's new guardians discovered them. Unfairly, he blamed her for his ruin. Her dreadful, disgusting devotion had betrayed him.

Besides, he was terrified by her persistence. Twice, on the day after the arrests, she had telephoned his office. The first time he had to speak to her himself. The second time she was answered by his clerk. His whole position in Hanningford was impossible.

He toyed with the idea of sucide. As an heroic measure it appealed to him, but he lacked physical courage.

He decided in the end, not only to live, but also to conceal his default. He had a good deal of margin in relation to the Marsden estate. Joyce would accept anything he said to her. The whole thing could be adjusted if he acted quickly enough. Everything could be smoothed out before she was certified. After that, he would sell his practice in the normal way and move to some other town. He felt that he had learned his lesson.

Unfortunately for him, Mr Pusey became too deeply absorbed in the

details of his new plan. He went on thinking about it, feverishly and persistently. So much so that he walked off the pavement in the main street of Hanningford in front of a lorry, which had no time to stop. He was taken to the Hanningford General Hospital and died the same day.

This was two days before the specialist came from London. Joyce made Mabel ring up Mr Pusey that morning to ask him to bring her the papers making him her guardian. She also wanted to make a will.

"He won't come," she told Mabel that evening. "Why won't he come?"

Mabel, who did not yet know what had happened, said Mr Pusey must be very upset by all that had happened.

"I know. But why won't he let me be a comfort to him? I love him so much."

"Hush!" said Mabel. "That's no way to talk."

"Why not? Is love a bad thing? There is so little love."

"Hush," said Mabel again.

"I must do it myself, then," said Joyce.

"What?"

"Make my will."

"You can't."

"Why not?"

"It wouldn't be legal. Not without a solicitor did it."

"I'll get another solicitor."

She did that, the following afternoon. She went to Tukesbridge, taking Mabel with her, and made a will. By that time everyone in the district, except Joyce, knew what had happened to Mr Pusey. Mabel, who saw the Tukesbridge solicitor before Joyce, explained to him about the impending visit of the specialist. He was a kind man, who did not mind wasting a little of his time to avoid hurting someone already maimed. Joyce found him very agreeable.

She left a considerable sum to Mabel, and lesser amounts to Rose, Jean, and Wilson. She wanted to leave Wilson out, because he was always rude to her, but Mabel persuaded her to add him in. She named the new solicitor and Fiona Goddard executors of this will. She left the whole of the residue of her estate to Mr Pusey.

On the way home from Tukesbridge, in the bus, Mabel told her, in a casual way, that her specialist was coming to see her on the next morning.

"All the way from London?"

"Yes."

"I always go to see him."

"Well, he's coming."

"Why?"

"Dr Matthews asked him."

"Dr Matthews isn't my doctor."

"Never mind. He's coming. You like him, don't you?"

"Oh, yes. He never says anything horrid to me."

Nothing horrid was said to Joyce the next day, but the grave news of the impending certification was confided to Mabel.

"It was to be expected," she answered, though there was a break in her voice. "When will they take her away?"

"In a day or two. I shall have to make arrangements. I'll let you know when we are coming."

"Thank you, sir."

Mabel took the doctors to the front door. She watched them get into the specialist's long black car and drive away. Then she went back into the house.

In the kitchen, late that afternoon, before Rose and Jean left for the day, Mabel told them the news.

"It'll be a relief to Farthing," said Rose. "People'll be able to go out after dark without expecting to be jumped out on from behind a hedge."

"She's never done that," protested Mabel. "You know she'd never hurt a fly."

The two maids looked at one another.

"Oh, wouldn't she?" said Jean. "I thought we knew better than that, now."

"It isn't the same thing," said Mabel.

"Leave her alone," Rose urged, and turning to Mabel, said gently, "Everyone thinks you're a brick the way you've stuck to her and all that. But it's beyond your power. She's dangerous, and wild animals have to be shut up, for their own sake as well as ours."

Crouching outside the kitchen door, with her ear to the keyhole, as she had listened to conversations in all parts of the house, for many many years, Joyce heard these terrible words, and knew that they applied to herself.

"Well, I hope they don't dilly dally too long over the arrangements," said Jean, briskly. "We don't know where we are, at present, do we? I'd like to be looking out for another job."

"You won't have any trouble," said Mabel. "At your age."

"Oh, Mabel," said the kind Rose, "whatever will you do?"

"Keep house for my brother," said Mabel, unexpectedly. "He lost his wife last year, and he's been pestering me ever since."

"Then why didn't you go?" asked Jean, astonished.

"I couldn't leave them two helpless creatures. I wouldn't now, only it's been taken out of my hands."

Miss Morley gulped down a sob as she heard this, and fearing that she would be discovered, crept away.

She went into the garden, moving slowly from place to place, stopping frequently, stroking the leaves of plants, leaning her face against the rough bark of trees, stooping sometimes to touch the grass and pick daisies, which later dropped from her unheeding fingers. She was saying goodbye to Marsden.

Her mind was made up. She did not understand all she had heard, but she grasped the main issue. They were going to take her away; they were going to separate her from Mabel.

Often and often she had heard herself discussed; in the drawing room between her mother and her friends; in the kitchen, as this afternoon; between Mabel and her mother, more intimately still, in the privacy of the bedroom. There had often been this talk of sending her away; to what they called a home. Well, she had her own home, Marsden. She was happy there. Why did they want to send her away? Why did they all want to leave her, Rose, Jean, Mabel, Mr Pusey? Why did they not all want to live at Marsden and be happy with her, for ever?

Tears flowed silently down her cheeks at the thought of Mr Pusey's unkindness, which she would never understand. But she continued to wander. Mabel watched her from the terrace, and the boy Trevor passed her quite close with the goats, when he fetched them that evening. She patted their heads as they went by, but said nothing. Presently Mabel left the terrace and brought her in, leading her by the hand.

When Mabel had said goodnight to her and gone away to her own room, Joyce got up and dressed. She dressed in warm things, because the night was cold, and she knew it would be colder out-of-doors. She put on a woollen jumper and her tweed suit, thick winter stockings, and strong leather shoes. Then she sat down at her window and waited.

From where she sat she could see the light in Mabel's room making shadows of the window on the lawn. Presently the light went out, and the garden shadows were fainter, built now by the moon, riding clear in the night sky.

She remembered that her shoes were noisy, so she took them off, carrying them in her hand as she moved silently out of her room and down the stairs. She made no noise at all. Mabel, above, exhausted by all the dread and confusion of the last weeks, slept deeply.

Miss Morley went into the drawing room and out of it by the french window. She sat down on the terrace steps to put on her heavy shoes, and then

walked across the lawn to the quick-set hedge.

Fiona will look after me, she thought, comforted by the still night and the pale silent moon. She moved on into the kitchen garden. It would not be safe, she had already decided, to go out by either of the gates. She knew that these had been watched for some days before her uncle was taken away. She had herself watched the watchers, from the bushes near the front drive, and from the corner of the old stables. Those watchers would still be there, she thought, waiting to take her away in her turn. Mabel had said so. Or something like it. She was to be taken away. That was certain.

She tried the door in the kitchen garden, but Trevor had not forgotten to lock it. He never forgot. So she went to the tool shed and found Wilson's secators and went back to the hedge and cut herself a hole in its stiff, spiky substance.

The spines on the twigs tore her fingers, but she worked on. When the hole was large enough she forced her way through it and crawled out into the rough grass of the meadow. I shan't need the secators again, she decided, throwing them back over the hedge.

She pulled at her disordered clothes. Her hair was in her eyes. She pushed it back, feeling a wetness on her face, that was not tears, but blood. The scratches stung as she scrubbed her face with her handkerchief. I will bathe my face in the river, she thought, and went on her way.

She had made up her mind that afternoon to cross the river. Little Farthing lay on the other side, and Fiona's house was there. As she could not go by the road on account of the watchers, she would cross the river. She had often seen boys in bathing trunks walking back and forth in the water near the road bridge. This was how she would go over.

When she reached the bank she sat down to recover her breath. The boys wore no clothes, or practically none, when they bathed. But she had no bathing dress, and she could not wear nothing. Sometimes, long ago, they had taken her to the seaside, and she had paddled in the edge of the waves. But she had always been frightened. That was years and years ago. She would not be frightened now. She would hold up her skirt and walk straight across and only her shoes and stockings would get wet.

Miss Morley slid down off the bank into the water. It came up to her calves. The bottom was soft near the bank and she slipped a little, but further out it grew firmer and shingly, though the water now came up to her knees.

The opposite bank was a long way off, for the river here was wide, approaching a bend. Joyce went on. The water rose to her waist, and she dropped her skirt to bring her arms up out of the water.

It began to be difficult to move. The heavy tweed clung to her legs, the water rose higher and higher, the bank on the other side, shining grey in the silver light of the moon, drew no nearer. The water came up to her armpits.

I must be halfway across, she thought. Why doesn't it get easier now? She remembered the boys, splashing in the shallows, flinging themselves down in mid-stream, to crawl through the deeper water there, then emerging, stamping up the other bank.

Perhaps I had better go back, she thought, and walk along the bank to that place near the bridge. The water was up to her neck now, and it had begun to push at her. Her feet, as she moved them, inch by inch, were carried sideways, in the current on the bend. I must go back, she told herself, and try again.

She began to turn, first into the stream, then, finding this impossible, away from it. As her bulk moved broadside on to the flow, her feet were swept from under her, and she fell backwards, sinking into deep water.

She bellowed once as she came to the surface; an animal cry of mortal terror. Mabel, far away across the lawns, in her room on the top floor, sighed, and turned over, and slept on.

While her strength lasted Miss Morley fought to live, not knowing her true escape was now immediately at hand. But soon the choking agony overcame her, the terrified, fluttering thoughts were extinguished, the writhing body grew still. Slowly, calmly, the moving river carried her away.

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